Prologue

If ghosts appear and disappear in your house, you would definitely find it annoying, scary, and also inconvenient.

You'd definitely try to get rid of it.

But how?

If you ask me, you would be walking a tightrope. If you don't live in Tokyo, then you better get on the train to Ueno, Tokyo.

You'd get on the railway, then get off at Shibuya. Actually, it doesn't matter which train, be it the Hanzoumon Line, the Ginza Line, or the Tokyo Line, you get on as long as you reach Shibuya in the end. Once you get to Shibuya, go to the front of the famous Hachiko. Find a kind-looking person and ask him for directions.

After getting directions, you can get here easily. Walk for a while and you'll be able to see a tall, brick building built in an old architectural style. There should be a plaza on the first floor.

—Did you find it?

Once you get there, take the elevator by the water fountain and go up to the second floor. Don't waste time looking at the clothing stores and tea houses downstairs. They're all very tempting, so if you're not careful you may end up going into one.

When you arrive on the second floor, look around. Do you see a blue-gray door?

In the middle of the door is intricate frosted glass, with the logo "SPR" written across in fine, golden calligraphy. Beneath the logo are the words "Shibuya Psychic Research".

Learn to recognize this door.

Eh, so you're wondering whether I'm from a tea house? Where did that come from? Of course I'm not. I said tea houses can't help you get rid of ghosts.

If you just go into a tea house without knowing what you're going to say, you'll be forced to leave. If you're unlucky, you're also be reprimanded with, "Can't you read the English on the door?"

"Shibuya Saikiku Risaachi"—that is to say, "Shibuya Psychic Research."

Do you get it now?

"Psychic Research" means the investigation of paranormal activity. "Shibuya Psychic Research" is a paranormal business office located on Shibuya Street. The name might also be named after the family's surname. Well, it doesn't matter where the name came from. The main thing is you can always reach us by phone.

"For exorcisms performed on a spirit or a possessed person, please call and arrange an appointment."

Basically, the job is about exorcising spirits and such.

Good, now all that's left is for you to have the courage to knock on the door. Inside, you will find an exquisite office. Usually I keep the guests company, but since I also do office work, I'm not always there to do that.

Sometimes there are situations where I'm not there. Instead, a skinny, tall man will greet the guest. If he's not there either, then no one will come out to greet the guest.

When that happens, a handsome, but arrogant, young man should be sitting on the sofa in the main room. He looks like he's sixteen or seventeen.

Never ever assume that he does paper work because of his young age. He has an abnormally high amount of self pride. If you make that mistake, don't think you can just get out of it. After all, he is the most conceited narcissist in the whole wide world, which is why he's known as Naru for short. If Naru's in a good mood, you can easily talk to him. He'll definitely help you solve your problem.

...If he's interested in your situation, that is.

"Is Shibuya Psy-something over here?"

A woman dressed in extravagant clothes entered. I'm working today with no breaks in between, meaning I'll be in the office all day. And so, I was the one who ended up greeting this guest.

"Is there anything troubling you?" I asked. I gave her a warm, business-like smile.

But she ignored me who was standing up and looked towards the sofa where Naru happened to be reading a book.

"That child over there."

...Scary how ignorant some people can be. Man, it's best not to call that guy a "child". It's really dangerous, just like calling a tiger a "meatball."

"Please, is there anything I can help you with?" I asked affably, again.

That woman glanced at me, then continued to ignore my questions. ...Ho ho...

Paying no heed to me she persistently spoke to Naru, "Child, do you work at this office?"

Naru didn't bother lifting up his head. Of course he didn't pay any attention to her. She called him a ‘child’.

I sternly asked her again, "Please, may I help you?" She ignored me again.

...Why you! Despite your age, you have no manners!

"If you have a request, please direct it to me," refraining myself from raising my voice, I politely asked her again.

She stared at me rudely then let out a disdainful hmph.

...Y-you're too much!

The woman turned to face Naru, "That child over there... I'm a guest!"

"A guest...?" Naru said coldly, not looking up from his book.

"Correct. You should answer my question. Otherwise, I will be given a bad impression."

...Exactly who's making the bad impression here!

Naru replied indifferently, "Please leave."

"—What the hell, I already said I'm a guest."

"I have yet to know of the etiquette I must show to a guest I've never met before."

...Nice and strong. Well said. Her face reddened, "You have no manners... Call the person in charge! I want to file a complaint!"

...Ah, stupid jerk.

Naru finally stood up, then faced the woman with eyes cold as ice. This kind of expression can stop anyone from talking. Pitch black hair, black pupils, and completely black clothes... He looked like a frightening, beautiful demon or vampire.

Naru calmly stated, "I am the manager, Shibuya."

The woman became speechless.

The manager looked at her disdainfully, his pale lips curved into a mocking smile, "Please leave." Simultaneously, he directed his voice to the nearby reference room and said, "Lin! Send the guest out."

The rude woman was thrown out by the tall, unfriendly assistant.

"Naru, is that okay?" I asked.

"What is?" He looked at me and calmly asked.

"That woman seemed very rich."

"It's okay," Naru silently reassured me.

"Let's not talk about this. Mai, tea." His gaze turned back to his book. What a terse order.

Tea, can't you do that yourself!

Even though I was thinking that, I knew it'd be too dangerous to say it aloud. Naru's in a bad mood today. People constantly came in, and they were all difficult to deal with too.

There was that rude woman, a request to investigate an extramarital affair, a request to cure an aching waist, and even a request to analyze a horoscope for marriage.

Furthermore, there was that guy who thought we were part of a new religion. The only reasonable request was, "My daughter has been behaving strangely. She must be possessed, so please come and exorcise the ghost."

I have to explain to them every time. This is a paranormal investigation office. We use scientific methods to solve paranormal phenomena.

Well, this isn't a detective agency.

You're mistaken. We do not supply medicine here.

I'm sorry, but we are not divine.

No, this isn't a religious organization.

...People, don't overdo it. Even if I'm not Naru, I'll still be angry.

"Here you go."

I placed the black tea onto the table.

As a sidenote, the tea we're talking about is black tea. Basically they don't drink green tea in this office.

"Eh..."

Naru didn't even raise his head. Can't you say a little ‘thank you’? This is the tea that I carefully prepared for you.

What a pain (I suddenly started to think over this like a little girl), I put all my heart into pouring the tea. It seems that I, towards this director....

I have various jobs here, like making photocopies and pouring tea. I always feel like I'm not helping out much.

And that's why I put all my heart into pouring the tea. Different days call for different teas. Since today was such a tough one, I decided to use Assam tea. I'm very careful about things like this. But it seems like he didn't even notice.

I met Naru during Springtime of this year at my school. —Even though I say it like that, he is in no way a transfer student. He's the head of ‘Shibuya Psychic Resarch’, and he came to investigate the ominous old school building.

Due to a number of random events, I ended up being his assistant during that case. And now I'm doing the same thing, helping him out in his office.

In the beginning I thought he was a very irritating guy. Even though he's handsome, he has a terrible temper. Not only that, he also has a sharp tongue and an arrogant personality. I can't stand it. But...

Love doesn't need to have a reason. How troublesome.

Of course, Naru has no idea about what I think. In his eyes I'm just an assistant (or so I believe).

Maybe Naru's not interested in girls? Sometimes that's what I end up thinking. No matter what the case, he's not the same as other guys—

First of all, he's the head of a paranormal investigation despite only being sixteen. He should be a year above me: a sophomore in high school. But no matter how I look at it, he just doesn't seem to be attending school. Can it be that since he already has a job, he decided to forget about school?

In addition, he seems to be completely into his work. He doesn't watch TV, go to the movies, read novels, and you don't even need to mention manga. He also doesn't listen to music. No matter what, he just doesn't do any of that kind of stuff.

Then, what does he do when he's not working? Well, he probably reads thick piles of documents and books. And of course, they're all books about the paranormal, and they're all in English.

As for hobbies, he likes traveling and magic.

That's a really strange hobby. He has a bunch of travel books and maps. Man, even if he has to go everywhere because of his job, all those maps and books are a bit too much. Sometimes he'll open a map, draw lines on it, then contemplate about it. Even though he often goes out on these little trips, he almost never goes to a tourism site. For instance, even if he goes to Kyoto, he doesn't visit the Kiyomizudera Temple, Kinkakuji Temple, or the Arashiyama Mountain.

It's the same with his magic. He has never performed in front of me. Even though I often see him fiddle with cards, I've never seen him perform a magic trick with them.

...Ne, isn't that strange?

Naru... Is like... A riddle.

You could say it's his strong point...

...It's done. I completed it like a little girl (♥)

Even I'm starting to think it's admirable.

Chapter 1 - The Spirits' Residence

1

Afterwards not many people came. I started to organize the books on the list. All of them were about parapsychology. Organizing them became part of my job.

I picked up an unbelievably stinky book, "Naru, what category is 'The Parapsychology Battlefield'?"

Naru picked up the book and flipped through it. "Parapsychology, Thesis."

"Got it~"

Right when I was going to write that on a card, the door opened, and a young lady entered.

She looked to be about twenty years old. Although she wore subtle clothes that adults usually wear, she gave me the feeling that she faced many difficulties lately.

"Do you need help with something?" I asked, walking toward her while she gazed uneasily back at me.

"Please excuse me... Is this SPR?"

Oh, a guest.

Slapping my business smile on, I directed her to the sofa.

Naru also stood up and greeted her. Today his temper was worse than usual. And no wonder. We had so many annoying customers today. And not one of them had a reasonable request.

I whispered mentally to myself, then went to the kitchen to pour tea.

"...Is something troubling you?" Naru still used his angry tone.

Noriko Morishita... Lowered her head, not looking up at Naru.

"...Well, strange things have been happening at my house," she admitted.

"What kind?"

Naru's tone seemed to say, most likely an incident occurred the day you bought the house, and you're just not used to the house yet. We've been getting these kinds of requests rather often. And Naru usually rejects them.

Noriko quietly responded, "There are strange sounds."

—Oh?

"Sounds of someone knocking on the wall and climbing onto the bed will come from empty rooms. The door opens and closes by itself..."

A glimmer of light flashed in Naru's eyes.

"The door opens and closes with no apparent reason?" he restated.

Noriko nodded uneasily. "Objects in the room won't be in their usual place. The room often shakes. At first I thought it was an earthquake, but it wasn't..."

...A real customer has arrived.

Naru's eyes gleamed. That means he's interested.

"Can you be more specific on objects not being in their usual place?" he inquired.

"Um... The flower vase moved, things I put in the drawer aren't there anymore, and they all end up in places they shouldn't be in."

"And the earthquake?"

"It kind of feels like an earthquake. The furniture emits a rumbling sound. And then there's this swaying feeling..." Naru signaled to Lin with his eyes, who then pulled out a cassette recorder to tape Noriko's account. Afterward, Naru asked her more questions.

"First of all, can you tell us about the other inhabitants?"

After Noriko-san left, Naru immediately started discussing the matter with Lin-san. It seemed like they'll accept Noriko's request.

Naru's really picky with requests. If he has no interest, then he'll definitely reject it. Out of the three months that I've worked here, this is the first time I've seen them ready to accept a request.

The rest of the SPR members joined us three days later. Luckily it was the summer holidays for all public schools in the country so I didn't need to go to school.

It was a two-hour drive from Tokyo. The house was built in an old architectural style. Noriko-san lived in a tall house near the woods. The first impression she must've gotten from the house was that it was dark. Dark and gloomy. Almost like it was completely foreign. The trees in the backyard nearly covered up the entire rooftop. The brick walls were covered by a painting of a mountain tiger. The vines had even started to reach the windows.

It really did seem like an old house. Even if I don't have any proof of it.

"What's wrong?" Naru turned around and asked.

"It's just..." I murmured

How can I talk about the house looking really dark and creepy with Noriko-san standing right there. When it was finally quiet, Noriko-san smiled, "Are you surprised that it's so old? They say that this house was built before the war. It always feels a bit lonely to me."

"...Oh."

The wind blew, rustling the leaves in trees.

"—Come in, come in," she ushered us.

At Noriko's request, I went inside.

The house looked so cool. The white walls and brown furniture gave it a quaint look.

"What a cool house..."

Noriko smiled at me and said "Thanks." Then her expression suddenly changed

to a serious one. "It would be better if those strange things didn't happen..."

...True. No matter how magnificent a house may look, they usually sell cheap because something bad happened there.

"My older brother's not here, so the place always makes me uneasy."

Oh. Noriko's older brother is the owner of the house, but right now he's overseas on a business trip. When he was away, many strange incidents had occurred. It must've been scary. Right now there are three females in the house, including Noriko's sister-in-law and niece.

Noriko smiled slightly, "My sister is waiting for everyone so please come along."

We entered the guest room.

"Ah!"

"Ge!"

"Eh?!"

The moment we entered, I let out a yelp. We had some guests.

"...Long time no see."

"Sly one, huh."

A man and woman, both of them about twenty years old.

...Why are you guys over here—

"Do you know them?" a bulky women asked curiously.

"This is Kana, my sister-in-law," Noriko introduced.

Kana-san bowed.

Naru answered her earlier question, displeasure evident in his blunt tone, "We've done business together before."

"So that's how it is... In that case, an introduction would be unnecessary."

"That's right."

Is an introduction really necessary? The man with the stupid look on his face is

a former monk from Mt. Kouya. The woman wearing the flashy dress is Matsuzaki Ayako, a priestess.

The old school building was rumored to be haunted. It was at that time when they came over to investigate. They're horrible people with no abilities.

So, why are you guys over here anyway—?

Not long afterwards, a little girl followed Noriko, who was carrying tea, into the room.

...Cute...

The supple girl almost looked like an angel or doll. Wearing a white dress, she was cradling an outdated doll with her tiny fingers. She looked like she came from a painting.

"This is my niece, Ayami," Noriko introduced.

Even though Noriko's older brother Morishita-san is still young, he owns a company. Ayami-chan is his daughter. Ayami-chan's mother isn't Kana-san. Her mother had divorced with her father a long time ago. It's been nearly a year since their marriage took place.

Oh— Ayami-chan's mother must've been a beautiful woman— Noticing that everyone was looking at Ayami, Noriko let out a small laugh, then introduced us to the woman carrying dishes, "This is our housekeeper, Shibata-san."

"So is that everyone?" Naru asked calmly.

Of course, Naru only enjoys looking at himself in the mirror.

"Right," Noriko-san answered Naru, "but Shibata-san doesn't live here."

Naru nodded, "I have some questions for you later. Kana-san, would it be alright if you prepare a room for us? A base for us to investigate from."

"No problem. Please come this way," Noriko raised her hand and guided us to another room.

2

Such a big house... So many rooms.

We were led to an empty room on the first floor near the stairs.

Naru examined the room and nodded. Then he turned toward Bou-san and Miko-san, "…Can you tell me why you two are here?"

Such a cold tone.

The priestess Ayako looked smug, "Long time no see. Can't you act a little bit happier?"

"I'm terribly sorry." Naru's expression was still cold and detached.

"So handsome, yet so fickle," Bou-san sighed.

Naru's lack of emotion and cold stare urged the two to reply.

"That's because," Ayako said, looking at Bou-san, "I had..." She pointed at herself. "...gotten a request from the nanny over here."

"Morishita's secretary requested me."

"And then I met Morishita's little sister—"

"It's easier to have more people around in this kind of situation."

"That's why we're here today."

"Then I was scared to death after seeing this simpleminded priestess over here," said Bou-san.

"You frivolous rule-breaking monk!"

They glared at each other.

"So that's why you guys are here." I followed their conversation.

...What a pain.

This was boring. What's up with Noriko-san; she could've told us this earlier. And then we would've told her that they're not good at anything except arguing.

"Man—we'll just leave it at that. Please continue to help us," Bou-san said, smiling surreptitiously.

Naru ignored the other two and looked at me and Lin-san instead, "Let's start working."

...It started again. Shibuya Psychic Research is doing tough work again.

Naru is a ghost hunter.

Ghost hunters... Are people who get rid of ghosts. Even though psychics can also investigate, Naru isn't a psychic. Or that's what he says, anyway. He uses state-of-the-art video cameras and equipment to help with the investigation.

Moving all that equipment is manual labor.

I went back to the van and started moving all the equipment. I already set up the shelves so all I had to do was move the equipment onto that. Seeing the room become a research institute, Noriko-san was really surprised.

"Is that the room where the paranormal phenomena occurred?" Naru asked.

Noriko shook her head, "There isn't a specific place where it occurs..."

Naru contemplated, then said, "Then we can place two videocams on both the first and second floor. And we can set one up in the hallway. Let's observe the situation first."

After we placed the videocams in those designated places, we were sweating.

"Still the same, I see," Bou-san sighed, glancing up at the mountain-pile of TVs and video cameras.

It really was quite a sight to see. There were twelve small TVs and some other commonplace equipment that I didn't see a use for. Lin-san sat in front of the equipment. The TV screens brightened, showing different areas of Morishita's house.

"What do you think of this place?" Bou-san asked Naru.

"I can't be sure as of now," Naru replied coldly. He seemed... Angry. He's a

really proud guy, so he dislikes it whenever someone else interrupts his work.

Ayako snickered, "I don't know anything about this ghost hunt stuff, but as always, you're making a big deal out of this. This isn't even a big case."

"So is this Matsuzaki-san's intuition?" asked Naru.

After hearing Naru, Ayako was at a loss for words.

In the old school building case, Ayako's intuition was never right.

"That time was an exception. This time I'm not wrong. The culprit is an earth spirit."

"You said that last time, but you guessed wrong," he stated matter-of-factly. Such a disdainful tone.

Ayako raised an eyebrow. She looked like a secretary or maybe even a college student with her formal clothing on.

Bou-san laughed loudly, earning a glare from the woman.

"What about you?" Ayako asked the guffawing man.

"Me? I know my stuff so my opinion counts."

...These two are still going at it.

"What about you, "ojou-chan"? You're Mai, right? Naru's assistant."

"As of now I'm doing various jobs. According to what Noriko-san said, this seems to be the work of a poltergeist."

"Oh."

"Heh."

Bou-san and Ayako's eyes were wide open.

Ah, humans are progressive creatures.

Poltergeist.. In Japanese it would be called a spirit who disturbs others. That's what the word means in a literal sense: a disturbing spirit. Objects relocating themselves and eerie noises coming from nowhere.

—There's an investigator in France named E. Tisane. He categorized poltergeist activities. They're called "Tisane’s Nine Criteria."

Explosions, knocking sounds, doors opening and closing, vibrations, eerie sounds, invasions, moving objects will be warm to the touch, and objects will come out of nowhere. Those are the nine criteria.

"According to what Noriko-san said, there're knocking sounds, doors opening and closing, objects relocating themselves, and eerie sounds. That's five conditions. As long as more than half the criteria is met, it can be considered a poltergeist. I think the possibility of this happening is pretty high."

Hmm— I've become smart. This is what I've learned from Naru's "you're stupid" assaults.

Bou-san laughed aloud, clapping, "Heh, pretty amazing. If it's a poltergeist, then who's the culprit?"

Hee hee. Nice, I was waiting for that.

"It's Noriko-san."

"Huh?"

"Poltergeist activities are usually caused by the house's inhabitants, most of which are women. After knowing that, isn't it obvious? She's been having difficulties with her older brother's sister-in-law, right?"

"So that's how it is," Ayako gasped with admiration. "Don't you think that Kana-san is strict? Perhaps she and Noriko-san don't get along well."

Yup, yup.

I sure am awesome.

Thinking that, I looked at Naru, who returned my look with a piercing gaze.

Huh?

"At first I wanted to praise you for remembering everything you learned so far, but," Naru continued coldly, "poltergeist culprits are usually between thirteen and fifteen years old, meaning they are undergoing puberty. Noriko-san is already twenty. Saying she's undergoing puberty right now is a rather outrageous idea."

...Oh.

"Although it's possible for a spiritually sensitive woman to be responsible.. No matter what, let's just observe the situation for now. We'll make a conclusion later."

...Hmph.

Bou-san looked at Lin-san. "Is that man over there Naru's assistant?"

Lin-san nodded slightly. He was injured in the last case so he had no choice but to rest for a while (please don't ask how it happened). That's why the group doesn't really know much about him.

"What do you think of this case?" asked Bou-san.

Lin-san briefly answered in a low tone, "Am I obligated to reply you?"

Both Bou-san and Ayako raised their eyebrows. "...You're definitely Naru's assistant. What a great personality."

Naru crossed his arms, ignoring them.

Lin-san is just that kind of person. He seems to be indifferent or maybe someone hard to get close to. Or maybe he's just rude. Even now, we have barely exchanged any words. I shouldn't push my luck because I still don't know his full name. And of course it's obvious I haven't seen him smile or joke around.

With the stiff atmosphere surrounding us, Bou-san and Ayako left the room.

Lin-san continued to look at the TV screen as if nothing happened. His bangs practically covered up half his extremely, stoic face. Like Naru, he usually wears black clothes. When they stand together, the atmosphere becomes gloomy, like that of a funeral.

3

When we were almost done with straightening everything out, Noriko-san brought us to the luxurious guest room.

If this were a deserted haunted house, Naru would never enter unless he knew it was safe first. But since people live here already— and one of them is an eight year old girl, it really shouldn't be dangerous. And so we're staying here for the night.

"Wow, it's so cool!"

Silk curtains, a dressing room, a dressing table, a nice bed, and even a small cabinet.

...Amazing, it's like a luxury. But will I get the chance to sleep here? No matter how I think about it, paranormal phenomena usually occur at night. That will definitely happen.

"Are you satisfied with this room?" Noriko-san asked, smiling.

"Yes. Thank you very much," I replied.

"Well, you don't have to be so polite, okay?"

"Yes, but..."

...After all, Noriko-san is the one who wanted us to investigate.

"Please."

"...Okay."

Hearing my reply, Noriko-san seemed happy. The room faced the west. When I reached the window, I was surprised. There was a pond south of the house. It was a lush, green pond.

"The scenery is amazing," I said in amazement.

Like me, Noriko-san also looked at the scenery from the window.

"...I've often thought that way too... But lately it seems scary..." she admitted.

"Scary?" I asked.

"Think about it. Aren't there stories like this? The young child that drowned cries out for his friend..."

It's a common story. I quickly answered, "Don't worry about it. That didn't happen here."

I couldn't explain the entire situation to Noriko-san though— perhaps, you are the culprit.

"...Thank you. My brother is usually not at home so it gets scary."

I chuckled, "Everything will soon be alright. Our director is here, and so is the priestess and monk. Those two often argue so much that it's easy to laugh at them."

"Really?" Noriko-san seemed a bit happier now.

Seeing her like that, I still thought that she was the culprit. Sorry...

"If it's okay with you, would you join me for tea? It's time for afternoon tea. Is it okay if Ayami comes too?"

"That would be awesome (♥)"

-

Carrying the tea set, Noriko and I went into Ayami's room.

"Ayami."

Noriko-san opened the door.

Ayami-chan was lying on the floor, reading a picture book. Her eyes swept toward us.

She seemed lost in thought, which made her look as cute as a rabbit.

"Hello," I smiled, waving my hand in hello.

Ayami-chan let out a happy smile, then pushed her picture book to the side.

She grabbed her doll and walked toward us.

She was holding the old-styled, foreign doll that we saw earlier.

The expressions on foreign dolls were always creepy, but this doll was kind of cute.

Ayami-chan turned toward me, then lifted the doll's left arm, "Hello."

I bent down and shook the foreign doll's hand. "Hi, what's your name?"

"Minnie," Ayami-chan said, moving the doll's little hand.

"Minnie, nice to meet you. I'm Mai."

"Nice to meet you, Mai."

Ayami laughed, then made the foreign doll bow. So cute—

"Ayami, it's snack time."

Hearing Noriko-san, Ayami-chan quickly nodded, then just as quickly shook her head.

What's wrong? What's up with Ayami-chan? They're snacks. Cute, pink cakes~ She became quiet, lowering her head.

...Weird. Ayami-chan, what's wrong, why are you suddenly acting this way...

After dinner, Naru gathered everyone together. Kana-san, Noriko-san, Ayami-chan, and the housekeeper Shibata-san. When Naru got everyone to sit down on the sofa in the guest room, he turned off the lights. The room became pitch dark.

"I'll have to borrow your time for a while," he stated.

After saying that, he turned on a light. The white light flashed on and off.

"Please look at the light."

The light flashed on and off in the dark.

Naru softly said, "Please breathe along to the light. Slowly now.. Relax your shoulders..."

Naru is trying to give everyone a hint. It's similar to hypnotism. It's an autosuggestion.

Using the light, I looked at everyone's face and realized they were all relaxed.

A poltergeist activity happened in this room (I think).

Usually poltergeist activities happen for various reasons. But most of the time people believe it's caused by a ghost or a demon.

A lot of culprits behind poltergeist activity are in fact, humans. Spiritually sensitive people will sometimes use their psychic powers unconsciously. Of course, it's not just a simple disturbance. No matter what, it almost always seems supernatural. The culprit is usually a teenager between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. But sometimes it's a woman with strong spiritual powers.

No one here is between thirteen and fifteen years old. That leaves a woman with strong spiritual powers...

"Please count the number of times you breathe," Naru said repeatedly.

They repeated that for five minutes. When everyone became relaxed, Naru stated our goal.

"Tonight, the flower vase in the dining room will move... The glass flower vase. Tonight it will reappear on the table in this room."

His soft fluctuating voice. If I were to describe the color of his voice, it would be clear, transparent.

"—Okay, it's finished."

He suddenly turned the lights back on. We blinked our eyes in hopes of adjusting to the light again.

"Now you are free to do what you want. But don't do anything you normally wouldn't. ...Morishita-san."

"Yes."

"Please give me the key to this room."

Morishita-san handed the key to Naru. At the moment there was a vase in Naru's arms, a flower vase.

Everyone's eyes were glued to the flower vase. In just an instant, the autosuggestion had succeeded. If the autosuggestion had failed, no one

would've looked at the flower vase.

Then will the flower vase move tonight? If the culprit is human, after the autosuggestion the vase will move. Meaning, if the flower vase moves, then the culprit is human. And the culprit would be among us. If the flower vase doesn't move... Then the culprit is not human.

Once everyone left the room, I placed the vase in the middle of the table, where Naru had drawn a circle.

Meanwhile Naru set a video camera up to record the table. The sensitive camera can record videos in the dark. Even if there's only a little light, the camera will record it as if it's broad daylight. Naru plugged the video camera cable into the outlet. After everything was put into place, Naru and I left the room too.

A radar, like the ones that airplanes use. That's the kind of radar we used.

Naru locked the door, sealing it with a piece of paper. That way no one would be able to go in. If someone forced themselves into the room, the paper would tear. The guest room had become an isolated room.

The other radar was on the other side of the wall, observing the flower vase. If the vase moved even slightly, then the radar would record that movement and send it to our base.

...Amazing~

As you can see, a ghost hunter and a psychic are completely different.

After the autosuggestion, we returned to our work room— Naru calls it our base, but to me it's more of a research institute— to put it simply. That said, Bou-san and Ayako were chatting again.

"Leisure time, I see," Naru remarked, his tone heavy with sarcasm.

Yeesh. If you think it's an earth spirit, then hurry and exorcise it already.

Bou-san replied, "I'll decide what to do after we see the results of that experiment. When I'm sure the poltergeist activities aren't caused by a human, I'll take action."

...Hee, Bou-san, you became smart. Is it because last time you didn't think of

all the possibilities and consequently got into a big mess?

Eh... Interesting. This means that you're acknowledging Naru's prowess. Last time you were all in his face, saying how what he was doing was meaningless. Hee hee~ Naru seemed aware of that too.

"How honorable of you," came a mocking voice.

Naru, don't laugh like that. Your eyes aren't laughing at all. Instead, they look cold and sinister. Can't you smile normally?

Something strange happened tonight.

At 9 o' clock, Kana-san ran into the research institute— No, I mean base.

"Please take a look!" she exclaimed.

"What's wrong?"

Kana-san's face was pale and frantic. She recklessly grabbed a calm Naru, "Please, come quickly!"

We— excluding Lin-san, which makes four of us— looked at each other, then followed Kana-san out of base.

4

We arrived at Ayami-chan's room.

Her room was on the second floor, just like the room I shared with Ayako-san.

"Look!"

Kana-san rushed into the room.

Our eyes widened as we observed the room. That table that used to be right beside the wall was leaned over. Not only that, the bed, bookshelf and wardrobe were all at a crooked angle, pushed to the edge of the room.

Dazed and sleepy, Ayami-chan stood in the corner in her pajamas.

"...What happened..." Bou-san whispered.

Kana-san replied firmly, "...When I came to get Ayami in bed, the room was just like this. And you still ask 'what happened'? Didn't I call on you guys because of things like this?"

Hearing Kana-san's uneasy retort, I grasped the situation and looked at the little girl, "Ayami-chan?"

Ayami-chan blinked her eyes several times, then raised her head toward me, "Why is the furniture on the sides?"

She was scared stiff.

"Yeah, that's right. What happened here?"

I also noticed the carpet was askew, pushed to the side...

I couldn't help but feel a chill run down my back.

Who could've moved all that? It was all so heavy. There was furniture on top of the carpet. Even with all my strength, I wouldn't have been able to move it 1 cm.

Who did this? And how did they do it?

Leaning on the side of the door, Ayako softly offered an explanation, "Didn't that kid do it?

I couldn't help but retort, "And how would Ayami-chan be able to do that?"

"That's what I was thinking," Bou-san agreed. "With all that furniture on the carpet, even I wouldn't be able to move it. Or are you saying that you can do it?"

He threw a ridiculing look at Ayako.

Oh God, here it comes again.

Naru calmly asked Kana-san, "...First of all, can we examine this room?"

"Yes, do what you want," Kana-san said, nodding. "We'll leave then."

Kana-san pulled Ayami-chan's hand.

Ayami-chan lifted her head and looked at us, "I didn't do it."

She was on the verge of tears.

"I know it's not your fault," I said hastily, in hopes of consoling her.

...It's all that brainless Ayako's fault!

What now? Ayami-chan is really upset.

Even Bou-san went and softly patted her head, "We all know it's not your fault. Don't cry, okay?"

"Okay," Ayami-chan finally broke into a smile.

After they left, we started to discuss the case.

"What's your opinion on this, Naru-chan?"

Opinion? What kind of opinion can you get from that?

"If someone is capable of accomplishing this, I'd like to see that person. Maybe Matsuzaki-san knows of someone like this, but I don't know of anyone that strong."

...Exactly.

Ayako turned around in embarrassment, like always. "I was just saying."

To demonstrate, Naru went up and pushed the bed. Bou-san went up too, to

help him. The bed didn't move, and the carpet made even less progress.

Naru looked around the bed, then said softly, "There aren't any marks on the bed. A human didn't do this."

And then a despairing cry came from downstairs.

We rushed down the stairs.

"What happened?"

We ran to the living room.

Kana-san was standing, her face chalk white. Ayami-chan was on the side, her eyes in a daze. Noriko-san rushed here, noticed the scene, and was shocked.

"......!!"

We ran to a halt.

The furniture was all flipped upside down.

The table, chairs, and even the bookshelf leaning against the wall were all flipped upside-down. The painting on the wall was also flipped upside-down.

No one said a word.

It might seem easy to flip the table over, but this table is composed of thick, tough wood. If Naru, Lin, and Bou-san all try to flip it over together, then it might work.

What about that cabinet? I drank tea here earlier so I know Kana-san puts her collection of clocks there. So many clocks. Some old, some new. There're marble clocks, brass clocks, bronze clocks, and even silver clocks.

It's a cabinet filled with heavy things... Plus, the cabinet was also made of thick, tough wood. It should be heavy... How was it moved?

Moving it down, flipping it over, and pushing it to the wall.

I suddenly realized something under my feet.

The carpet, which was under all the furniture, was also flipped upside-down.

We set up video cameras in Ayami-chan's room, our room, and the living room.

Today, it seemed like Ayami-chan was sleeping with Noriko-san.

Naru looked at the equipment in those two rooms, then he started contemplating.

Bou-san suggested, "That's right, it's obvious. The problem is who's causing the poltergeist activity."

"It's not an earth spirit?"

"At first I thought it was."

...Here it comes again. You always say it's an earth spirit, and last time you were wrong? Or did you forget that part already?

Naru didn't reply.

"It doesn't matter what it is because this can be taken care of easily. I will exorcise it tomorrow," Ayako declared, standing up.

"Naru-chan, are you still watching the TV screen? You're wasting time," Ayako nagged.

Naru ignored her. Ayako flicked her hand as she left the room.

"Well, if you want to keep watching the TV screen then just keep doing that. I'm going to sleep."

...You still act like you're so important. I don't understand where you get all that confidence from. In the last case, you didn't pull your weight at all.

After Ayako left, Bou-san asked, "What's up? You seem to be concentrating hard on something."

Naru ignored him. Hey, you should at least answer.

But Bou-san didn't seem to care. "Did you find any clues?"

Finally, Naru answered, "Don't you think they reacted too early?"

"Huh?"

Light flickered in Naru's dark eyes. Such a deep color.

He proceeded to explain, "Spirits normally hate outsiders. When outsiders come into their house, they usually hide for a certain amount of time."

"True."

I asked Bou-san, "So that's the case with this house?"

If I asked Naru instead, he'd chide my ignorance.

"Yes... Doesn't this usually happen on TV? When people try to record a haunted house, nothing ever happens."

"Oh..."

"Whether it's a spirit or a poltergeist, once an outsider comes, they usually lay low for a while... It should be this way."

Naru's eyes were fixed on the TV, "But so many incidents have occurred since we came here. And they're all more serious than the ones Noriko-san mentioned."

"...Yeah. Noriko-san only mentioned objects swaying in her house..."

"What do you think?"

Bou-san's eyes became serious and intense, a rare moment to see, as he crossed his arms, "...Usually the reactions weaken. A loud sound would instead become a soft sound created by friction. But if the reactions become stronger instead..."

Bou-san stopped for a moment. "Repulsion."

Naru looked at Bou-san. "So you think that way too?"

"Yes. This house seemed unhappy the moment we came here."

"Plus, it showed us a number of incidents in our short time here..."

"This poltergeist isn't an ordinary one."

Naru nodded, his voice barely a whisper, "...This could be a troublesome one."

I stood up uneasily.

...A troublesome one...

When nothing else moved in the night, we finally went to sleep around daybreak.

5

The flower vase on the table was still in the same place. It didn't move into the circle on the table.

"How's it going?" I asked, watching Naru use the video camera.

"The flower vase didn't move."

"As expected, nothing here either. There are no responses."

Once we got back to base, I asked Naru, "Since the flower vase didn't move...Does that mean the people who live here didn't cause the poltergeist activity?"

"Yes."

"Hey, can the culprit be Noriko-san's older brother who's overseas right now?"

"That would be impossible because he's not here. I've never heard of a case where a middle-aged man is the culprit. Even if it is him, the poltergeist activity would've left when he left. If that were the case, the poltergeist activity would occur whereever he is staying at."

"Then... Is it because of a ghost?"

"I can't be sure on that yet."

...Please, just tell me if it is.

Naru turned around to me, "That can't be determined right now. Mai, check the temperatures of each room."

He then turned around to face Lin-san, "Lin, check the foundations of this building."

That quiet, un-amiable man responded, "Okay."

Lin-san stood up.

In the afternoon, while I was measuring the temperatures of each room, Ayako started her exorcism.

The location seemed to be Ayami-chan's room. When I passed by our base, I saw Ayako in a video camera, standing in front of an altar. Behind her was a confused-looking Shibata-san, Noriko-san, and Kana-san. A Shinto prayer started to come out of the microphone. "I humbly invite you to come down onto this heavenly altar..."

Bou-san sat in front of the equipment, obviously at ease. Lin-san went out to investigate the well, while Naru went around the house to investigate.

"Please cleanse the sins..."

"Bou-san, aren't you going to do something?" I asked him.

...What a sly guy. He's the only one acting carefree.

"Come on," I urged him.

"Are you saying you know Naru's conclusion?" Bou-san replied.

I wanted him to do something since I didn't think he'd act so laid back, "That's right. Even though it's okay if you relax a bit, you shouldn't just sit back and not do anything."

...Bastard. You only know how to gain from others.

"Oh, mighty heavenly God, I beseech you to come down..." the prayer continued.

Hearing Ayako's voice again, I left the room. Bou-san ran up to me, "What? Jou-chan? Aren't you going to stay longer?"

"I'm busy, unlike a certain monk."

...Hmph.

"You... Act more like Naru-chan everyday."

"Well, yeah. It's like they say. The manager and his parents are alike, just like the employer and employee are alike."

"What are you talking about?" Bou-san asked, "well, I'm going to keep watching. Good luck." ...And you still act like you have a lot to boast about. The

least you can do is help out.

After Ayako finished her prayer, she turned towards Kana-san, a confident smile on her face, "Tonight you may sleep with ease."

What's going to happen now?

"How's the situation?" I asked Naru as I handed him a piece of paper with the recorded temperatures of each room.

Now it's ten o'clock.

"The temperature in Ayami's room is somewhat low," he responded.

...When a spirit shows up in a certain place, the temperature decreases.

Naru placed down my report, then looked at a layout of the house.

"This house isn't slanted, and the foundations are solid. Although water flows under this house, it does so smoothly. In addition, the water level hasn't decreased."

Poltergeist activity can be a result of the house being slanted or land subsidence. But after a day of investigation, it turned out to be neither. In other words...

"It's a ghost?" I asked him.

"That's a high possibility."

...Oh.

He... Said that in such a carefree way.

Actually, I'm really scared of ghosts (blabbering). A lot of poltergeist activities are caused by humans so I'm not completely scared. But I've never seen a ghost before. When I told ghost stories with my friends, I wasn't scared either.

But I'm getting scared now... I really do have an extraordinary job. —And then, Shibata-san's shrill cry rang through the air.

On our way to the kitchen, we bumped into Noriko-san. When we got there, we were frightened for a moment.

The pipe was on fire!

Noriko-san screamed. Shibata-san was frozen stiff with fear.

I quickly looked around.

The fire extinguisher. Where's the fire extinguisher?!

The huge flames almost engulfed the opposite wall.

Naru and Bou-san pulled Shibata-san out of the way while I reached for the fire extinguisher by the refrigerator.

"Noriko-san, don't you have any other fire extinguishers?!" I yelled as I turned the fire extinguisher on. Mist sprayed into the surroundings. Noriko-san ran grabbed another fire extinguisher and helped.

Using the two fire extinguishers, we finally put out the fire. Noriko-san shut off her fire extinguisher.

Noriko-san and Shibata-san slumped onto the floor.

"Thank... You."

Shibata-san continued to tremble. Bou-san tried to comfort her.

"Madam, are you alright?"

"Ah... This kind of thing... Happened."

"Well, let's end this for today. Do you want me to give you a lift home?" Shibata-san reluctantly nodded. I was about to praise Bou-san for being so caring, but then the air suddenly became cold.

Someone's at the window...

Even though the room was lit by a small light, I was positive there was a child there. That child looked at us from the window.

Then it suddenly disappeared.

"Naru!"

"What?"

"Did you see that just now?"

Naru looked at the direction my finger was pointing at, "What was there?"

"I saw someone there..."

Naru ran to the window and looked outside, "No one's here."

"Someone's there. I'm sure of it. And it was looking inside too... It was a child."

Everyone became nervous.

"Was it Ayami-chan?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see the face."

"But, Ayami-chan's already asleep," Noriko-san said uneasily.

Naru turned his intense gaze downward onto the floor, thinking carefully. "Let's look at the situation first."

Ayami-chan slept in Noriko's room again tonight. The lights were off in Noriko-san's room, however in the dimness we could see Ayami-chan wasn't asleep... In the dark room, she was sitting up in the bed, playing with her doll. She placed a small quilt on Minnie.

A girl playing with her doll in the dark. It sounded sad.

Ayami-chan raised her head.

Noriko-san turned on the lights, then sat by her, "Ayami, were you in the kitchen just now?"

Blinded by the lights, Ayami-chan blinked her eyes before shaking her head in surprise. She looked uncomfortable under Noriko-san's interrogating gaze.

"No I wasn't."

She shook her head furiously.

Noriko-san let out a soft sigh. A loud sound came from the ceiling. It was almost as if something was hitting the ceiling.

We looked up at the ceiling. The sound didn't stop.

"I didn't do it!" Ayami-chan cried out.

"I didn't do it!" She cried again, tears brimming in her eyes.

The thumping sounds continued, as if they were responding to Ayami-chan.

The chandelier swayed, making a creaking sound.

The thumping sounds grew louder and louder.

The bed and furniture rocked too.

"Noriko-san, it's dangerous here..." Naru warned.

Right after he said that, the bed flipped over and the bookshelf started to fall.

"Noriko...-san...!"

The bookshelf and toys on the bookshelf started to tumble onto the frightened woman.

I couldn't help but scream.

Ayami-chan screamed too.

As if on cue, the lights went off.

6

Noriko-san was hurt in many places, but luckily her injuries were not serious. She went to sleep in another room.

We returned to base. There was a TV screen showing Ayami-chan's room. Tonight Ayami-chan was sleeping with Noriko-san again. That's why no one was in her room.

The brightness of the screen was because this was taken with thermal imaging.

The string of numbers on the screen changed continuously. That indicated the time. The other thermal cameras were placed in the living room, the kitchen, and the hallways on the first and second floor.

The blue and orange colors indicated the temperature. This was thermography, which is used to show temperature. The orange color indicated a high temperature, while the blue color indicated a low one.

Nothing changed on the T.V.

"Looks like you gave up," Bou-san commented, glancing at Ayako, who immediately turned her head to the other side.

"Yeah, it's beyond my abilities. I'm really sorry."

...Ignorant jerk.

"...But, don't you think it's dangerous?" Ayako's voice was uneasy. "The pipe broke...and suddenly burst into fire. Doesn't this poltergeist seem strong?"

...Then, doesn't that mean it's dangerous?

As if sensing I was uneasy, Naru coldly suggested, "If you're scared, you can go home."

...I'm not scared.

"Well, there will be a solution," Bou-san said in a carefree tone, "The gas valve

is already closed. Fire won't explode from it again."

...This guy isn't nervous at all.

"Naru-chan, doesn't it seem strange?" Bou-san asked.

"Ayami-chan's situation?"

"Yeah, that poltergeist back there seemed to react to the kid's actions. Mai also said she saw a kid back in the kitchen..."

"Are you saying that Ayami-chan is the reason for the poltergeist activity?" Bou-san touched his jaw, "The autosuggestion showed that the culprit isn't someone who lives here. How much confidence do you place in that test?"

"A hundred percent," Naru replied bluntly, "the culprit doesn't live here."

"Your autosuggestion might've failed."

"That's impossible."

...You're still full of confidence, Naru.

"Don't say it so resolutely..." Bou-san said, not willing to give up. A low voice intercepted, "Naru is an expert at autosuggestion so that would be indeed impossible."

...That voice just now...was it Lin-san's?

"Oh, you sure trust him a lot," Ayako snatched this opportunity for sarcasm.

But Lin-san just continued to look at the TV screen. "I'm only stating a fact."

Such an emotionless voice.

Sometimes I mistake him for a robot.

Ayako was about to say something else, but then Lin-san cut her off, "Naru, the temperature is decreasing."

Naru looked at the TV. "...What's the time?"

"Two fourty-two a.m."

At this time, a red light shone on the edge of Ayami-chan's room.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at the screen.

"The sound reception, —Lin, the speaker."

As soon as Lin-san set up the microphone, eerie sounds came out.

"......?"

A booming sound came down, followed by a quiet knocking sound. A cracking sound sounded through the air. Noisy sounds filled the air. It almost sounded like a mob of people was running around up there.

"Such strong sounds..."

There was nothing on the screen. No one was in the room. Nothing moved in the room either. It all seemed scary.

"This is...really serious..." Naru whispered.

Even Naru's trembling now.

"What?" I asked.

"The temperature suddenly dropped..." Naru murmered.

I looked at the computer screen. "Thermography?"

You can observe the temperature with thermography. Warm colors indicate high temperatures, while cool colors indicate low ones... The screen was filled with a deep, blue color.

"The response is strong. The temperature's still dropping... It's below freezing temperature..."

Naru looked uptight.

The strange sounds continued.

"Ayami-chan didn't do this. No human could've done this..."

...Then, that must mean..

"It's a ghost?"

"Correct, and a strong one too..." Naru looked tense.

"Seems like Bou-san was correct."

"It's a Jibakurei?"

"I'm afraid so." In the three months I've worked in Naru's office, it's finally come to this. When I just started this job, I wondered if I would get to meet a real ghost.

I was almost scared to death.

This was a rare sight: Bou-san seemed excited as he stood confidently, "Well it's like I said, I'm not the same as Ayako. I'm actually capable."

"You were extremely accurate," Naru chuckled.

Ayako turned unhappily toward Bou-san, ""It's a bolt from the blue", right Naru?"

"...Huh?"

Bou-san couldn't help but smirk, "Whatever you say. If there is a ghost, it'll be my turn now. I'll perform a magnificent exorcism."

"As long as you don't fail," Ayako smiled coldly, "well, let me see your exorcism then. You say you are very capable."

"Of course. I'm not incapable of exorcism like you."

"But you failed in the last case as well."

"That was—"

...Here it comes again. Bou-san and Ayako. It always comes out like this. But deep down inside, I can't help but feel that those two are good friends.

The eerie sounds persisted for a while before quieting down.

We finally got some rest.

Chapter 2 - Girl

1

When I woke up on the second day, Naru had already left. Said he had to do some research. And so, I let Lin-san take care of base while I went to Noriko-san's room.

Lin-san is hard to deal with. When we were alone in base, I almost felt like suffocating.

Ayami-chan was playing House by herself.

"Ayami-chan, can I play with you?" I asked.

Ayami-chan shook her head silently.

Noriko-san was standing on the side, her arms crossed.

Ayami-chan let her doll Minnie drink tea, then eat cake.

"Ayami-chan is really obedient."

Hearing my words, Noriko-san's face had a kind glow. "She wasn't like this before..."

"Really?"

"Yes. She was more extroverted before. She loved to annoy people. But ever since my older brother remarried and moved here, she's been awfully quiet and doesn't smile much anymore."

"...Hey, Noriko-san?" I tried to be courageous. "Is Kana-san... A good person?"

"Huh?" Noriko-san looked at me in surprise, then chuckled, "She and my

brother's relationship is really good. I get along with her too. Even though she can be strict, she's a good person. But Ayami-chan still acts nervous around her..."

"So that's how it is..."

We chatted until 3:00 pm, when Kana-san came in to give us snacks.

Handing out snacks was really the maid's job, but today she's not here. After yesterday's incident, she quit.

Kana-san placed the cookie tray onto the table, then turned toward Ayami-chan. "Ayami, are you playing by yourself? Such a good girl. What are you playing?"

Like a doll, Ayami-chan's expression was emotionless. She did not look at Kana-san.

"At least answer me," Kana-san's voice tightened, "they're snacks, after all."

Kana-san roughly placed the cookies right in front of Ayami-chan. Ayami-chan looked unhappy.

"What's wrong? You don't want them?"

Ayami-chan shook her head.

Kana-san glared at Ayami-chan, then left the room.

Noriko-san let out a deep breath, then looked at Ayami-chan, "Ayami, you don't want to eat the snacks?"

She shook her head.

"Then, I'll eat them."

Suddenly Ayami-chan shouted, "Don't!"

"Eh?"

"They're poisoned!"

We couldn't help but stare at the little girl.

Ayami-chan tried her best to explain. "Minnie told me! The snacks are poisoned! That woman is an evil witch!"

...An evil witch. Poison...

I bent down toward Ayami-chan, "Minnie told you this?"

"Yes. That person is an evil witch. Don't trust her. She put Daddy under a spell and made him her slave. She thinks me and my sister are in the way, so she's trying to kill us!"

...What did you say?

Ayami-chan's eyes were serious. Her eyes were earnest.

"That witch is going to kill us one day! Because we're in her way!"

"...So Minnie told you all this? Not someone else?"

Noriko-san and I continued to look at the serious girl.

"Minnie told me. Minnie won't lie. So onee-chan and Mai-san must be careful! The witch wants to kill onee-chan, cut her body into pieces, and then hide them. Then she'll tell Daddy that onee-chan left home. The witch wants to make me drown in the pond and then say it's an accident!"

I softly asked Noriko-san, "...You didn't teach her to say all that, did you?"

"...Why would I!"

...Then, why is this happening?

Strange. This isn't something an eight year old would think of. Witch and magic... It sounds like a fairytale.

Ayami-chan's face was chalk white as she clutched her doll.

I felt scared. Is this Ayami-chan's imagination? Would an eight year old think that way? Ayami-chan didn't speak again; she just clutched her doll tightly. Pale and weak, the little girl could barely stand.

Is Ayami-chan always thinking about this? This lonely, skinny girl thought of all this? Is that why she doesn't talk much or smile anymore?

After that, I went back to my room and took a nap. Bou-san was going to do a prayer again so I wasn't missing out. And so I snatched this opportunity to get some rest. I probably won't be able to sleep well tonight anyway.

I lay down in bed, then fell asleep. The sun rays streaked in, giving the room a rosy tint.

...This must be a dream.

Half-asleep, my body felt light. I wasn't really drifting in air; I was slowly falling down into empty space... It's a hard sensation to describe.

I opened my eyes in surprise.

The room was getting dark.

Someone else is here.

...Who is it?

I slowly turned my head.

A gloomy shadow, a figure clothed in black. Just standing there. A pale face. Naru?

Why would Naru be in my room? When I thought of it that way, I turned to look at him.

Naru smiled slightly, his eyes warm. The corner of his lips were curved into a smile.

...What's wrong? Why are you standing there?

I was about to ask him. Suddenly his face became solemn. He seemed anxious.

What is he saying. I can't hear.

...What? What did you say?

I gazed into Naru's eyes and tried to read his lips.

...Ayami-chan...?

What about Ayami-chan?

I didn't get it. But it looked like Naru said "dangerous."

...Ayami-chan's in danger?

...Ayami-chan?!

Suddenly I woke up.

.....

I got up in bed and quickly looked around. The room was kind of dark, but Naru wasn't here. Of course.

He wouldn't be here.

Oh?

...Was I dreaming about him?

—I must be too tired. Yes, that's it. I'm doing too much work for someone my age. And then there's our relationship.

...Ayami-chan...

I started thinking about her again. Frail, little Ayami-chan. Minnie's her only friend, and she plays by herself.

And then, those words she said today.

"Evil witch", "Daddy's her slave" ..."The witch will kill me and onee-chan one day."

What's wrong with this house?

What's wrong with Ayami-chan?

...Ayami-chan's in danger...

I lay flat on the bed.

Ah—I'm so tired.

...Why Naru. Sometimes I really can't believe myself. The Naru in my dreams is kind and smiles warmly. Is that what I want?

Oh— Eh...

"Ha!"

I tried to get my spirits back and sat up. Nothing will happen if I just think about it. Right now, Ayami-chan's problem is the priority.

I climbed out of bed and got ready to work again.

2

After dark, Naru came back. Base became a meeting place again. As Naru walked in, Bou-san waved at him, "Yo. Did you make any progress from your research?"

"It was okay... Have there been any changes here?" Naru replied absently, his head turned toward Lin-san's direction.

"As of now, nothing changed." Bou-san persisted, "I performed an exorcism today."

"Really."

...Hey, Naru, can't you use a softer tone.

"I think the exorcism was successful."

"Congratulations."

Bou-san wrinkled his face, "...You, how come you're not cute at all?"

"My cute side merged with my capable side. —Lin, give me a layout of Ayami-chan's room."

...Just give up Bou-san. You can't make him cute.

Ayako snickered, "Forget it. You can mess with the handsome guy after you succeed."

"That's right. Otherwise I'll end up ashamed just like Ayako."

"...What did you say?"

"Nothing."

...Can't you guys be quiet?

Naru stood up, his face devoid of emotion. "Mai, come here. We will examine the camera's angle."

"Okay."

...Hey you, do you only think about work?

Naru and I went to Ayami-chan's room to check on the videocam.

On the way back, I spoke to him, "Come to think of it, I have something important to say."

"Do you want me to listen?"

...Why you.

Fine then! Say what you want! I was going to answer like that, but then I held myself back and explained to him in a calm, business-like manner.

"...Don't you think that's kind of scary?" I asked.

Naru thought about it for a moment, then answered, "I want to see the doll first. Where is it?"

*

"Over here."

"Oh? So this is Minnie?"

Noriko-san seemed confused, "Yes, it is..."

Naru took the doll, then squinted at it with his deep eyes, "When did you buy it?"

"Before we moved into this house. My brother went to Europe... This is a gift... He said it's from Paris."

"Did Ayami-chan's personality change before or after that?"

Noriko-san thought for a moment, "Afterwards...I think."

"I see..."

I looked at Naru, "Is something wrong?"

"...I'm not sure."

"Give it back!"

Suddenly Ayami-chan's voice shot out into the air. I was so scared I jumped. Ayami-chan pulled at Naru's black clothes.

"Give Minnie back! Don't touch her!"

"Ayami-chan, can you speak with Minnie?" he asked.

Naru didn't get a reply. Ayami-chan persistently stretched out her hand and finally grabbed the doll back from Naru.

"I won't let anyone touch her!"

Ayami-chan clutched onto Minnie, then turned around and ran.

Naru walked out, his face deep in concentration.

I didn't sleep well tonight either because I stared at the TV in base.

"What's that?" I asked.

I pointed to some numbers on the screen.

"Don't point at it. Your finger is too unsteady."

...Oh, come on.

"That indicates the quantity of ozone in the air. On the side is the quantity of static electricity. And on the side of that are the components of the atmosphere... Do you have any other questions?"

...No.

I was about to complain, but then Naru stood up. "It's starting."

"What is?"

It really is. The temperature of Ayami-chan's room decreased dramatically.

I looked at the equipment. Three of the thermography machines whirred. Now it was in temperature mode. The video camera slowly changed its angle until it faced the bed. In the center was Minnie, situated on top of a pillow.

We took the doll from Ayami-chan when she was sleeping.

"Bou-san, they're saying the temperature is dropping," Ayako remarked .

"It's just the wind," Bou-san replied.

Even though he sounded confident, are things really going to go smoothly?

Concentrating on the TV, Naru didn't seem to hear the monk's comment.

Minnie's emotionless face was in the videocam. Glass eyes. Emptiness.

"Dolls sure make me feel uncomfortable," I said.

Behind me, Bou-san replied, "Well, of course." He crossed his arms. "Dolls used to be vessels for human souls. Hitogata resemble humans. In the past, they were used to curse people."

"Huh—?"

Ayako nodded, "It can serve as a channel for curses. Sealing spirits into voodoo dolls. Then you stick needles into the doll. If the voodoo doll is damaged, so is the person it represents. This is a method to hurt people."

...Oh—

...Naru abruptly stood up.

All eyes turned toward him. Naru stared intently at the screen.

I stood up too. Ayako, Bou-san, and Lin-san all leaned forward.

...Minnie's head was facing downwards...

When did it happen? I was just watching the screen a moment ago!

Minnie's golden hair spread across the pillow.

Under our intense gaze, Minnie moved. Sliding and moving, she moved like a stiff puppet. Her head fell off.

...Scary...!

The dismembered head rolled on the bed. Then there was the sound of it hitting something. It was as if the doll was alive.

Afterwards, the temperature in Ayami-chan's room rose until it was back to normal range.

We rushed to her room.

Everything was the same as we left it. The head didn't fall off. Minnie didn't seem any different; she was sitting in her old position.

In addition... The video camera and cameras were working properly. But when we re-winded the tape, it was all blank. There was no sound either. Everything was just blank. All the data recorded was gone. That is to say, we didn't have any evidence of what we saw... It was almost like a nightmare.

We were stuck in quicksand, not sure what we could do even though Naru said this happened often.

But now we know one thing for sure.

Bou-san's exorcism was also unsuccessful.

3

In the morning of the second day (though it was almost noon), I rushed to base, only to find that Bou-san had beat me there.

"Where's Naru?"

The only people in the room were Lin-san and Bou-san.

"He said he had to do more research."

"Eh—"

What is he looking up anyway. I suddenly remembered yesterday's dream.

"Ayami-chan's in danger."

Naru told me that in my dream.

Danger.

"...Noriko-san? How come I haven't seen her?"

"She and Kana-san went shopping."

After hearing Bou-san's reply, I left the room.

"Hey, where're you going?" Bou-san called out.

"Noriko-san's room."

I can't let Ayami-chan be with Minnie by herself. I just knew that would be a bad idea. Playing with that doll would be dangerous.

I hurried to Noriko-san's room.

What's Ayami-chan doing? Is she playing? Like usual? Right when I was about to knock, I heard a voice talking, "This house is filled with witches" —It was the voice of a little girl.

...Witches?

Who is it? That's not Ayami-chan's voice.

I pressed my ear against the door.

"I'm scared..." Ayami-chan whimpered.

"Don't be. I will chase them away."

"Will onee-chan be gone? Will Mai-san too?"

A dark snicker—"Of course..."

"I like being with my onee-chan."

"No, no. I told you already. Your onee-chan is the witch's underling." —Another snicker— "But don't worry. I'll help you deal with them... So in return, you must listen to me."

"Ayami-chan!" I shouted as I opened the door.

Ayami-chan was the only person in the room. In front of her was the foreign doll, Minnie. No one else was here. Ayami-chan lifted her head and looked at me, her eyes clouded in confusion.

"Ayami-chan, who were you talking to?"

"...Minnie," she replied.

My excited tone must've scared her. I put on a smile and sat down by her, my voice soft and light as I spoke. "Minnie?"

"Yeah, and some other kids too."

Some other kids...

"So there are other kids besides Minnie. Where are they?"

Ayami-chan pointed her finger, "Over there."

I looked at the direction she was pointing at.

No one was there.

Ayami-chan's acting really strange.

"...Can you introduce them to me?"

"Okay... Oh, they left," Ayami-chan said, her gaze shifting toward the door.

I was horrified, but I put on a big smile anyway. "I see. I guess they don't like me much."

Ayami-chan lowered her head.

"Where did you guys meet?"

"I dunno." "You don't know? Are they classmates?"

Ayami-chan shook her head.

Don't know? What's wrong? Or is she just unwilling to tell me? Kids that I can't see...

My voice was trembling slightly, "Ayami-chan's friends... When did they start coming here to play with you?"

"...I don't remember."

"Was it after you moved in?"

"Yes."

"Are you good friends with them?"

Ayami-chan seemed sullen as she nodded her head, "Minnie brought them here..."

Minnie... Brought them?

Naru came back later than yesterday.

"You must be tired," Ayako grumbled as she welcomed Naru back. "Did you find anything? We're still waiting for you to prove yourself."

Her tone was more sarcastic than usual.

—At lunch, we had an argument with Kana-san. And no wonder. The prayers and exorcisms from yesterday didn't work.

Naru ignored Ayako.

"Lin, anything new happen?"

"No. It's the same as yesterday."

"Really... What about Ayami-chan?" Naru asked me.

"She's in Noriko-san's room. She should be with her onee-chan now— is something wrong?"

"No. That's good."

What's wrong?

Naru was deep in thought.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

"No," came a muffled reply.

"Did Ayami-chan have any problems?"

"Not really."

...If nothing was wrong, would you really ask that? What's going on?

How is Ayami-chan related to what Naru was looking up?

"Naru, Ayami-chan's condition seems weird," I said.

The moment I said that, Naru turned swiftly toward me.

I told Naru all the strange things that happened. The weird sounds. And the children that I could not see.

Bou-san and Ayako listened in wonder.

Ayako immediately started to complain, "That's strange. What's up with this family?"

"I keep thinking that this case and that little girl are intertwined... The doll, too," Bou-san muttered.

Hearing Bou-san, Naru looked down at the carpet, his dark pupils intense.

Ayako still did not give up on the earth spirit theory. "Let's see, what can be the cause of all this? ...An earth spirit. Yes. You can find out if there are any rumors about this house from a neighbor."

Naru stopped Ayako before she said anything else. "I investigated that already."

"Huh?"

"There are no rumors about ghosts in this house."

"...Oh, come on..." Ayako sighed as she leaned against her chair.

"The important thing is, Minnie might be possessed," Bou-san stated.

"...Kids that only Ayami-chan can see. Kids that Minnie brought over. Don't you think it's strange?"

Ayako cocked her head. "Ghost children... Minnie brought them here...?"

"Isn't that strange?" Bou-san repeated.

"Kind of..."

"The doll is dangerous," Bou-san sighed.

"Really?" I asked. Man, how come I didn't know that?

"That's right. Dolls are humans without souls. In other words, a soulless body. They're really easy to possess. That's why spirits were sealed in dolls as a way of cursing."

"I just never liked dolls. They always seemed scary. Ah, I always thought dolls were empty and that they could summon spirits. They look like humans too."

...Please don't say anymore... Ayako turned around, "I still think it's an earth spirit. The main root of the problem seems to be that doll. Fine then, I'll exorcise the spirit."

Seeing Ayako all energized, Bou-san interrupted her, "Well, spirit exorcism is my job."

"You don't need to pretend. You should go find that jibakurei of yours."

"...Really. I know already!" Bou-san suddenly started clapping his hands. "A jibakurei bound to Minnie!"

After saying that, he turned to Naru, "Don't you think this is it?"

"Yes, most likely."

Bou-san nodded proudly, "Okay, that's good. Then all I have to do is exorcise the spirit that's bound to this doll."

"Hold on a moment," Ayako called out to Bou-san, "we can't know for sure if

the exorcism will work. Why don't we call Masako?"

Silence filled the room.

Masako... Hara Masako? The medium that's about my age. In our last case, Naru was very polite to her.

"If Masako were here, we can find out for sure if that doll is possessed," the priestess stated.

...This could be a good method.

But Naru didn't seem to like it. "That would be unnecessary. Bou-san, how about you perform the exorcism."

Ayako seemed unsatisfied. "But isn't this way more dangerous? If the doll is possessed, then during an exorcism, won't the spirit possess Ayami-chan instead?"

"It's possible... Matsuzaki-san, can you protect Ayami-chan?"

"Ah, yes. This way, if anything bad happens it can be resolved quickly."

"...Oh?" A look of surprise flashed across Miko-san's face. "I never thought you could be so considerate. I didn't expect you to let me do this."

"I thought you might like a chance to redeem yourself."

"Thank you. After this case is solved, would you go on a date with me?"

...What is this crazy priestess thinking!

"Sorry, but I reject," Naru replied coldly before turning toward Bou-san. "Bou-san, can you do the exorcism?"

"Just leave it to me."

It was almost 12 o'clock. After we took the doll from the sleeping girl, Bou-san started the exorcism.

Ayako was sitting beside Ayami-chan.

On one side was a stick figure; in the front were two knives. Ayako's left hand was carrying a bead necklace, while she carried a bell with her other hand. There was a spell paper on Ayami-chan's chest.

"I'm ready."

I went to Ayami-chan's room to tell Bou-san what Ayako just said. "She's ready." I was running around, delivering messages. Naru was in base, looking at the equipment should something happen. Bou-san nodded, signaling that he was ready. I ran back to base.

Once I reached base, I heard Bou-san's voice from the microphone, "Na u ma ku san man da ba za ra dan." Bou-san started the Buddhism chant that I did not understand again. It's supposed to be a Buddhist mantra.

"Sen da ma ka ro sha da so ku ta ya un ta ra ta kan man."

Minnie didn't look any different. After the temperature dropped five degrees, it became stable. It didn't drop dramatically. There weren't any eerie sounds from the microphone either.

"There should be a response..."

Naru cocked his head, deep in thought. Suddenly there was a moaning sound. The sound came from Ayami-chan's room. When we got there, it looked like a small hurricane just went through the room. Everything was messy; the furniture were all pushed and slanted onto the walls.

Ayako held the chalk-faced Ayami-chan. Noriko-san shrank onto the bed.

"Noriko-san, are you alright?" I went to console her.

"Noriko-san?!"

Her pale face was wrought with fear as tears filled her eyes.

"What's wrong? Does something hurt?"

"...My leg..."

"What's wrong with your leg?"

Bou-san ran up to us to look at her foot. "...Her ankle... Is dislocated..."

Noriko-san's right foot was longer than her left foot because her ankle was dislocated.

"Call the ambulance."

Naru rushed out the door.

Noriko-san clutched my hand. I could feel her shaking.

"The person... Who pulled my foot... Was very strong."

"...Who...?"

"I don't know..."

Bou-san pointed at her foot. There was a clear hand print near her ankle.

...A child's hand print.

4

"Exactly what happened here?!"

Kana-san called the taxi to take Noriko-san to the hospital. Ayako leaned closer to Bou-san as he explained, "I'm the one who wants to know what happened! It felt like a small earthquake, but then all this happened!"

"Aren't you here so that you can prevent this from happening?!"

"I can't help it either! It came so fast that I couldn't do anything!"

Naru put a stop to their argument. "...The situation is already like this. Even if you argue, nothing will change. Instead..."

Naru looked at Ayami-chan, who shrank back in response.

"Ayami-chan, exactly what happened?"

Ayami-chan shook her head.

"Did Minnie do this?"

Ayami-chan didn't answer. Then she looked like she just remembered something.

"Where's Minnie?!"

"I'm taking care of Minnie for you right now. Can you tell me some things about Minnie?"

"Give Minnie back to me!"

"When did Minnie start talking?"

"Give Minnie back! She's my friend!"

"Ayami-chan!" Naru's imposing voice made the little girl shrink back even more.

"Listen, your onee-chan is injured. Minnie did that, right?"

Ayami-chan's eyes were filled with tears. She looked like an injured animal.

"This is troublesome for everyone. Does Minnie think this is okay?"

Ayami-chan shook her head, unsure of what to say.

"Ayami-chan!" The moment Naru shouted, Ayami-chan started to cry. She rushed off the bed and ran to my side.

"Mai!" she cried out.

"Don't worry. Don't be scared," I soothed her.

Naru's voice was still cold and stern. "Ayami-chan, Minnie, did she..."

I gave Naru a cold stare. "You insensitive jerk! She's already crying so much, but you still won't stop!"

"Mai! Now's not the time for this!"

"Now is the time! You cold-hearted bastard!"

Ayami-chan cried out, and I stroke her hair. "Don't worry, don't worry."

"...Rry!"

"Hm? Don't worry. It's not your fault."

"...I'm...sor...ry!"

"Ayami-chan..."

She held onto my hand. "Minnie told me I can't speak with anyone else! If I do, she'll punish everyone!"

"...Minnie said that?"

Sobbing, Ayami-chan nodded. "Minnie said I can't speak with other people. If I do, she'll hurt everyone else. But I really want to play with onee-chan and Mai-san...!"

Minnie's threatening her. Poor girl.

"When did Minnie start talking?"

Naru was using a softer tone this time.

"...After we moved here."

"What did she say at first?"

"She said my stepmother's a witch, and Daddy's her slave. She said they want to kill me."

"What else?"

"Minnie said onee-chan is also on the witch's side. Minnie said she'll protect me, but then I can't talk to other people..."

...Poor girl... She must've felt so lonely.

"Sometimes I forget what she says, and I play with onee-chan. But then Minnie messes up my room and hides my toys."

"You didn't tell anyone about this?"

Ayami-chan shook her head.

So that's why. I get it now. All the poltergeist activity that happened here: the toppled over furniture, the slanted furniture... it all makes sense now.

All because she threatened Minnie. That day, Ayami-chan smiled at me and introduced me to Minnie. That's why Minnie got angry.

"She said that was my punishment. So..." the girl continued.

"—And then Minnie brought all those kids over?"

"Yes... A lot of kids too. Boys and girls that are about my age. All of them are Minnie's underlings."

"We must quarantine Minnie for a while."

It was a fresh and cool morning today. Noriko-san still didn't return from the hospital. Kana-san is with her now. Last night, Ayami-chan slept in my room.

When we went to base, Bou-san stated his opinion, "Minnie must be the cause of all this."

"She's the reason for all of it?"

"Yes. For example, if a former inhabitant of this house died, it might've been Minnie's fault. I have a friend who specializes in destroying cursed dolls. I can ask for him..."

Naru immediately rejected, "That would be of no use. The problem isn't Minnie."

"What did you say?! Aren't you wrong? What do you mean it's not the doll's fault."

"Why?!" Ayako interjected.

"Intuition."

Ayako retorted coldly, "Your intuition? Why must we follow your intuition?"

Naru ignored her.

"The problem is Minnie is being used as a vessel... The doll, however, is just a toy. A ghost in this house has possessed Minnie..." Naru raised his eyes. "Minnie is dangerous. We must find the real culprit."

She's dangerous? "...Are you kidding?"

"It would be good if that were so..."

Right when I was about to ask Naru to clarify, Noriko-san dashed toward us, "Mai! Mai!"

"Noriko-san! You're back from the hospital? Is your injury healed already?"

"Now's not the time to talk about that," was her swift response.

"What's wrong?"

"Please, come with me. Shibuya-san, you too. Something strange happened."

"What?"

Noriko-san pulled us into the corridor.

Kana-san's face was chalk white as she looked at the wall.

"Come quickly! Look!"

Noriko-san pointed at the wall behind us. After we all turned around, we sucked in a big breath.

Who did this...

Words completely covered the wall.

"This bad child must be punished."

"Bad child, meaning Ayami-chan...?" I asked.

Naru nodded in response.

"Ayami-chan violated her promise with Minnie of speaking with other people. Minnie thinks Ayami-chan betrayed her... Mai."

"Eh?"

"Stay with Ayami-chan and protect her."

"...Hey, Naru, nothing will happen to Ayami-chan, right?"

"I don’t know."

"It can't be!"

Naru blinked, then lifted his head, "I can't back down now. I'll call in a professional."

"A professional?"

"Yes, Minnie is possessed by a spirit so I have to call in a professional."

"Are there people who can take care of it?"

"Of course— Exorcists." ...Ah!

John-san? John-san?!

5

In the afternoon, I sat in the backyard with Noriko-san as we played House with Ayami-chan.

Meanwhile, Naru and the others were cleaning the message on the wall. They didn't want Ayami-chan to see it.

It was Naru who suggested that. Maybe he's considerate, after all.

...That can't be. Maybe someone secretly suggested this to Naru.

Minnie wasn't with Ayami-chan now. Bou-san sealed the doll in a box with a protective charm on it. Right now he's trying to burn the box. Even though Naru said it won't do any good.

After the writing on the wall, Kana-san was missing. There was a note on the living room table.

"I cannot stay in this creepy house anymore."

It was the only sentence on the paper.

Noriko-san was kind of surprised. The maid had resigned, and now, Kana-san left. Only she and Ayami-chan remained.

"Mai," Ayami-chan handed a paper cup to me. "Have some tea."

"Thank you."

I bowed, and laughter arose from Ayami-chan. It had been so long since I've seen her smile. Before, she was threatened by Minnie so she wouldn't say anything. She must've been so lonely. "Onee-chan, have some tea."

"Thank you."

"Onee-chan, does your foot hurt?" Ayami-chan suddenly asked.

Noriko-san shook her head. "It's fine now. As long as Ayami-chan cares about

me, it'll be okay."

An angelic smile lit up Ayami-chan's face.

Thank goodness. I can relax now.

"Onee-chan, do you want flowers?"

"Yes."

And then Ayami-chan stood up to go get flowers. "I'll pick some flowers then."

"Then I'll go with you," Noriko-san offered.

"No, you're hurt so you can't move. I'll go find some flowers."

"It's only a small injury. I can go."

"No! Mai-san, let's go."

"Okay." I let Ayami-chan pull me into the beautiful, purple flower garden.

"Just pick a few, Ayami-chan," Noriko-san shouted to us.

Ayami-chan nodded, her hand reaching toward a flower. Suddenly Ayami-chan screamed.

"Ayami-chan?!"

Ayami-chan turned and twisted in effort to get her hand back. But her hand was stuck. I held onto her hands and pulled, but they just wouldn't budge.

"Ayami-chan!"

Noriko-san limped toward us.

I moved the flowers apart in attempt to see what was holding onto her hand. Ayami-chan's hand was immediately released. Crying, she ran off.

Looking at the purple lavenders, I realized nothing was there.

"Ayami-chan! Wait!" Noriko-san called out to the little girl.

I turned around and saw that Ayami-chan was running deep into the garden.

"Mai-chan! Stop her! There's a pond over there!!"

...A pond? A pond?!

To the south of the house was a big, deep pond. The petals of the lotus tree near the pond often fell into the water.

"Minnie! I'm sorry!" Ayami-chan screamed, as if she was running from something. Then she ran around the lotus tree.

"Ayami-chan!"

She ran around the lotus tree near the pond, her foot slipping in the process.

"Ayami-chan!" Noriko-san yelled.

Ayami-chan reached out her hand, but grabbed nothing but air. Without even having a chance to scream, she fell into the murky water.

"Ayami-chan!"

"Ayami!"

Noriko-san and I ran toward the pond.

The water splashed, while Ayami-chan sank.

We reached the edge of the pond.

Ayami-chan!

The pond was deep. It would go up to my head if I were in it. For Ayami-chan, this was too deep.

"Ayami! Where are you?" Noriko-san yelled.

I saw Ayami-chan.

"Ayami-chan!"

The little girl reached her hand out, screaming something inaudible.

I reached my hand out and grabbed hers. "It's okay! It's okay!"

Water flowed out of Ayami-chan's shirt.

Noriko-san swam to her side. "Ayami!"

"Onee-chan! Onee-chan!"

Ayami-chan finally spoke.

"It's okay, it's okay...! Don't be scared."

Noriko-san hugged Ayami-chan.

Soon after, Naru and the rest came running and pulled Noriko-san and the crying Ayami-chan out. After Ayami-chan took a bath and put on new clothes, Noriko-san and I became relieved.

Noriko constantly rubbed her hair, muttering, "Thank goodness... She's okay."

"Onee-chan, you're drenched too... You might catch a cold," Ayami-chan said.

"Oh, thank you, but I'm okay. Ayami, are you okay? Does everything feel alright?"

"Yes. Mai-san is also...wet."

"It's okay. I'm fine." I smiled to reassure her.

Is this Minnie's retaliation? Is this the revenge that Ayami-chan deserves for her betrayal? "This bad child must be punished"...

So this is her punishment.

6

Noriko-san let the newly dressed Ayami-chan rest for a while.

Breathing hard, I rushed toward base. Minnie, the doll that was supposed to be burnt to smithereens... Was sitting on the shelf...

I couldn't help but shout, "Wha... What happened!"

Bou-san angrily shook his head. "It didn't burn."

Huh?

"The box burned, but Minnie didn't."

Terror flushed through my body.

"Even though Naru said it would be no use, I still thought it would work with a doll. I've encountered this situation before. The doll-loving girl died and possessed her doll. Every night, the doll would move and spill water everywhere."

Naru still held onto his beliefs. "There's nothing wrong with the doll. The problem lies within the spirit that's possessing Minnie. That's all."

Ayako looked at Naru and Bou-san, then sighed. "Ah... If we had a psychometrist, then everything would be okay."

Psy... What?

Seeing the blank look on my face, Bou-san and Ayako shook their heads.

...Oh, come on.

Naru looked fed up with me, but answered anyway. "Someone who can use psychometry."

What a bad explanation.

"So, this psymetry thing, what is it?"

"Psychometry. It's a type of ESP. The term was coined by an American scientist, Buchanan. In other words, it's token-object reading. After touching the object, all things about the object can be known. Information on the origin of the object, the past owners of the object, and the present owner can all be known after one touch. Gerard Croiset of the Netherlands and Peter Filis of the U.S. are well known for their ability."

Oh...

"This morning, if a psychometrist were here, then we'd be able to know about Minnie's manufacture and her previous owner, right?"

"Yes."

"Wow...amazing. That must be really convenient." I sighed, then noticed everyone was laughing.

"Well, it definitely is convenient," Bou-san laughed sarcastically. "But psychometrists usually end up searching for corpses."

"Cor-, corpses?"

"That's right. If they touch the missing person's belongings, then they can pinpoint the location of the missing person."

Gasp— What a horrible thing to have to do.

"Whether it's Croiset or Peter— or other famous psychometrists, like England's Oliver Davis and America's Alex Tanous, all of them help the police find missing people."

"Oh—So the police there ask them to help?"

"Something like that."

"Well, we can't get a psychometrist," Ayako sighed. "At least call Hara Masako. She might be able to help. What do you think?"

"I said that would be unnecessary," Naru refused, his voice stone hard with certainty. Then he stood up. "I'm going to check up on Ayami-chan."

...Could it be that Naru doesn't like working with Masako?

Ayami-chan was sleeping soundly in Noriko-san's room.

Looking at her sleeping face, Noriko-san spoke, "I want to give my brother a call about moving out of this house."

...Awesome! Ayako and Bou-san won't have this burden on their back anymore. Naru's tone stopped her. "Some poltergeists will follow those who move."

"Then tell me what to do! When will this all end?! Only Ayami-chan and I are left in this house!"

Naru didn't answer. "Noriko-san... Do you know about the history of this house?"

"...History?"

"I've done some research on the past owners of this house."

Noriko-san looked at him uneasily.

Naru's eyes seemed to have a dangerous sparkle in it.

"Ten months before the Morishita family moved here. The owner before this was the Watanabe family, who lived here for three years before selling the house due to work."

"So he didn't sell the house because weird stuff was happening here?" I asked.

Naru nodded. "That's right. The neighbors also said they didn't hear of any ghost rumors. The family before that was the Nogi family. Their nine year old daughter died here."

A nine year old...

"One year older than Ayami-chan. They say it's because of an illness. The family before them was the Onuma family. In half a year, all three of their children died."

"All three?"

"Yes. A ten-year old boy, an eight-year old boy, and a seven-year old girl. All were either because of accidents or illness. And so the Onuma family sold the house."

"....."

I felt sick.

"Before them was the Murakimi family. No one died in that family. They had a fifteen year old daughter, but nothing happened to her. The family before them, the Taniguchi family, had three childen of the ages fourteen, fifteen, and eighteen. Nothing happened to them. However, a child of their relatives came here to play, and he died. He was about ten years old.

The family before them was the Ikedas. Nothing happened to them while they lived here, but after they moved away, their seven year old daughter died. Children that're about fifteen are okay. The family before them, the Tachibanas, had an eight year old daughter who died here."

"Hey..." I said, a bad feeling overcoming my stomach. "So what you're saying is... Children about eight years old are in danger here...?"

"Seems like it."

...Ayami-chan...!

"...Then what should I do!" Noriko-san cried out.

There was a family with a daughter who died after they moved away... It really makes me feel forlorn and hopeless.

"If you want to move away, I won't stop you. But please wait. As of now, you will be in danger even if you move. I've already called a professional so if you want to move out, at least wait for him to come."

Noriko-san nodded her head in consent.

7

The exorcist had arrived by sunset.

Clothed in priest robes, John came by taxi.

John Brown is a Catholic exorcist. John looked at us with his blue eyes. Although he's nineteen, he looks like he's sixteen or seventeen. He's Australian.

"Long time no see."

He learned Japanese in the Kansai area.

He ran toward us. "Shibuya-san, where's the doll and child?"

We dove into action.

"Ayami-chan's on the second floor, sleeping. The monk is guarding the doll."

"I wanna to see Ayami-chan first. Can one of y'all take me to her?"

...John's the same. He still talks in a strange way.

We went to Noriko-san's room and saw Ayami-chan asleep.

After John was introduced to Noriko-san, he examined Ayami-chan's sleeping face.

"I'm not sure if I can help out, but I'll try my best."

John read the bible, then used holy water to draw a cross on the wall and door. When he drew a cross on Ayami-chan's forehead, she budged slightly. John took out a silver cross, then placed it on Ayami-chan's body.

"I'm not sure if this will help out, but better this than nothing."

"Thank you." Noriko-san bowed to him.

Smiling, John turned around to ask Naru, "Shibuya-san, where's the doll?"

Something surprising was awaiting us.

Naru strictly asked Lin-san, who was watching over the equipment. "Lin! Where's Minnie?!" Lin-san looked at Naru, surprise evident in his face. "If you want to see Minnie, she's right..."

His hand stiffened as he pointed to nothing.

Minnie's not there. She was supposed to be on the shelf.

"...Did it run away?"

"Sorry." Lin-san bowed his head. Naru bit his lip, then reverted back to his stoic mask. "It'll come back... Definitely."

It was 2:00 a.m.

Suddenly the house started to shake. The poltergeist activity started. It was almost as if it was looking for something in its rampage to turn the house upside down.

All the furniture moved, rapping noises started, and stomping sounds could be heard.

"It's so... Strong," John murmered uneasily. "The degree of it is so high."

Bou-san stared at the equipment. "Looks like John's prayer is working."

...Seems like it. Minnie was practically searching everywhere for Ayami-chan.

"In other words... This boundary is effective."

"Boundary?"

"In simpler terms, it means a place that the spirit cannot enter." Bou-san almost went into a laughing fit again.

...Oh.

Not really understanding, I nodded and then looked at the equipment. In the middle was one TV screen, shining bright red. The microphone was transmitting sounds.

"Naru! Machine #6 is receiving sound!"

"Switch it."

"Okay."

Sound overflowed from the speakers.

—It's a child's voice.

There were knocking sounds on the bed and walls. And though unclear, there was definitely a child's voice amidst all this, crying out.

"That's... Ayami-chan's invisible friend..." I whispered.

Naru nodded, "Most likely. It's so noisy. How many children are there?"

The ghostly sounds faded earlier than usual, and soon a dark silence was looming over us. Nothing changed.

"It disappeared... Why?"

"I'm not sure, but..." Naru stopped short.

Because he soon understood.

Ayako, who was supposed to be watching Ayami-chan, ran toward us. "Naru!"

"What's wrong?"

"Minnie came back!"

What did you say? Ayako handed a bundle wrapped in bedsheets to him.

"This. It's too scary."

John came over and unwrapped the bundle, closing the doll's marble eyes.

"When did it appear?"

"Just now. Noriko-san noticed a bundle under the blanket near Ayami's legs... She unfolded it and found Minnie."

"Is Ayami-chan okay?"

"...She's fine..."

Just then the ghostly sounds stopped. Even though the sounds were so loud and serious this time, why did they stop?

—Because Minnie found Ayami-chan.

It's 4:00 a.m.

John had finished preparing an altar. Minnie was placed inside, underneath a

silver cross of Christ. John took out a glass bottle, then started to pray.

"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God..."

Minnie was wearing a blue skirt, her skin pure white. Her marble eyes were closed, and her teeth ivory white. It felt like a nightmare.

Minnie's an empty vessel that's possessed by a spirit.

And also, she wants to hurt Ayami-chan.

Why?

"Please look over us and protect us."

John was speaking softly. The small silver cross had been laid across Minnie's forehead.

And in that moment.

Crack.

The sound of the cross breaking. Minnie's eyes fluttered open.

Behind me, Ayako took in a deep breath.

It couldn't have opened its eyes. Dolls are inanimate objects.

John shifted around slightly, then continued his prayer.

Minnie didn't move again. Its hands were stiff, its marble eyes still.

"All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made."

John opened his thick bible and raised the glass bottle.

"In the beginning..."

John read and moved the glass bottle. He sprinkled holy water onto Minnie. Minnie's body rumbled.

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."

John read and sprinkled holy water at the same time.

Finally, a wisp of smoke rose from Minnie's forehead, followed by a cracking sound. The doll's skirt fluttered in the wind.

"The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."

Minnie's marble eyes rolled down, and the cross on its forehead slid down. There was a scar of the cross on its forehead.

"The exorcism was successful," John announced as he stopped his prayer. He turned around to look at us. "However, the ghost did not disappear. Just to be safe, I think we should burn it."

Naru nodded and handed the doll to Bou-san.

Bou-san burned Minnie in the backyard.

This time the doll was easily overtaken by the fire as it burned to smithereens.

Chapter 3 - You Can't Play with those Kids

1

After I woke up from my nap, I went back to base to watch the video. That's when everyone started to discuss the case.

"What's up with all that wailing?" Bou-san asked. "There were so many voices; it's not just one or two. It's not just Minnie."

Ayako agreed, "There are other ghosts here besides Minnie. But no one can see them except Ayami-chan."

"Those are the kids that Minnie brought over..."

"Well, isn't that the case?" Ayako asked Naru. "We can't just guess like crazy. Why don't we call Masako?"

Naru's face was stern.

Bou-san urged him as well. "I say, Naru— Why do you hate Masako so much? She's pretty, and didn't you say that she was really capable?"

"There's no need," Naru replied, his voice steel hard.

"Ha ha," Ayako laughed happily. "I know, I know. It's because she has a terrible personality."

...Do you have any right to say that?

John said, "...Well, let's put that to the side for now. I believe Minnie is a jibakurei, right? There must've been a strong reason for Minnie to become a jibakurei. She's one of the kids who died here, right?"

"Most likely." Bou-san nodded. "Minnie is a jibakurei. She died here as a child, and since she's lonely, she wants friends. That's why she brought all those other kids here. The kids that die here become her playmates. Then they turn into jibakurei too..." Naru considered the idea. "Yes...that would make sense, but..."

"But what?"

"The problem is why is it just kids? If a child wants to find a playmate, then it wouldn't be limited to just kids. A motherly figure, a sister figure, or anyone who can be comforting... These should suffice as well."

"You do have a point."

"But those spirits only care about Ayami-chan. If Noriko-san and Mai were also targets, then it would make more sense. But Ayami-chan is the only one they want."

"...Ah..." Bou-san contemplated. "It's strange... What can be the motive of those spirits..."

"Yeah, Shibuya-san. The kids who die here become jibakurei. Minnie is the boss of those kids. What about the first kid who died here?" asked John.

"It's possible... Lin."

Lin-san silently took out a notebook. Naru took it and flipped through it.

"Try an exorcism again."

"How do we do that?" Ayako asked mockingly.

"It's Bou-san's turn."

"Mine?"

Naru handed the notebook to Bou-san. "The first child who died here was Tachibana. The birth and death dates are below the name. The child was in the Buddhist sect. Below that is her post-"Buddhist name"."

Bou-san stared at the notebook, his eyes open wide. "...You sure did thorough research... All this is from seventy years ago..."

"This is a simple task for me. I'm not the same as you."

What a confident tone. This jerk... Is really too into himself.

Bou-san went to Ayami-chan's room to start the exorcism.

John and Ayako stayed in Noriko-san's room to protect Ayami-chan.

Naru, Lin-san, and I were in base watching the screen.

Bou-san put his hands together.

"Naumaku sanmanda bazaradan sendamakaroshada sowataya untarata kan man."

"Mai, pay attention," warned Bou-san.

"I know."

Unnerved and anxious, Naru stared intently at the screen.

"Naumaku sanmanda danan on boron."

"Naru, the temperature is decreasing," informed Lin-san.

"What about the sounds?"

"Right now there's nothing different... In fact, it's eerily quiet."

"On sunba nisunba un bazara un hakku."

"The temperature decreased by... Two degrees. Especially the temperature near the bed. There are no abnormal sounds."

"Naumaku shittiriyazibikyanan sarabatataagyatanan an birazibirazi."

"...The rapping sounds have started. Should I transfer them?"

"Not right now."

"Makasyakyara baziri satasata saratei tairatarai bidamani sanbanzyani taramati siddariya taran sowaka."

"The temperature is decreasing dramatically... Especially the bed's surroundings. It's about ten degrees now."

I looked at the thermography screen. Taking a closer look, I noticed a deep blue color surrounding the bed."

"How are the rapping sounds?"

"They're still continuing... Nothing else is unusual."

"Oh..."

Naru said absently.

I almost felt like dozing off in front of the TV, but then I noticed something strange.

"Naru! The living room!"

I pointed at the screen.

A white wispy fog clouded the room; it was eerily quiet.

Naru stood up immediately. "Lin, what's the temperature of the living room?"

Lin-san shifted the computer slightly. "As of now, the temperature is negative two degrees."

"Negative...?!" Naru looked at Lin-san in disbelief.

I asked breathlessly, "Why the living room?"

"How would I know!"

"What's the smoke?"

"I don't know... It could be because of the sudden temperature drop..."

"Naru, I've directed the sound here." Lin-san had connected the microphone.

The room was completely silent.

The white mist... The fog... Was swirling around.

A circle... It looks like a child's face...

"Isn't that a child...?" I asked breathlessly.

It looked like a wispy child's face.

...I'd rather say it's scary than say it's sad.

At that point, the living door room opened.

"...What?"

A small figure came through the door.

"Ayami-chan...!"

Ayami-chan?! What is John and Ayako doing?

Ayami-chan looked at the wispy smoke, then walked to the middle of the room. She woke up and started to move.

The speakers transmitted Ayami-chan's laughter.

"What? They brought me here, " Ayami-chan said as she looked at the smoke.

"No one wants to go to sleep? It's late, but they still want to play? They'll be reprimanded."

...Ayami-chan...!

I stood up.

"Mai, you can't help if you go!" Naru shouted.

I ignored Naru's advice and dashed out of the room. If I don't go, if I don't go...!

Naru stood up and faced the microphone. "Bou-san, go to the living room! On your way there, look into Noriko-san's room and find out what those two idiots are doing!"

I rushed toward the living room. The moment I reached my hand toward the door, static electricity shocked me and my hand bounced back. Naru reached his hand out. He had covered his hand with a jacket so unlike me, he was able to open the door.

"Ayami-chan!"

The room was filled with smoke. In the middle was Ayami-chan, standing there in a daze.

"Mai-chan...?"

Too scared to enter, I called out to the little girl from the doorway. "Ayami-chan, come here to my side!"

"But they want me to play with them."

"You can't. You can't play with them."

"But..."

The smoke entwined Ayami-chan. The thickening smoke had Ayami-chan trapped in a daze.

"Ayami-chan!"

"They won't let me go!"

When she shouted, a black figure came from behind Ayami-chan.

...That's not a child. Is it a... Woman?

The black figure reached her hand out toward Ayami-chan.

"Ayami-chan! Your back!"

Bou-san held onto my hand, preventing me from springing into the room. His hands were crossed.

"Child, come here."

"No! Mai, I'm scared!"

"Don't be scared! Calm down and come here!"

This time Naru grabbed onto my hand. Let go!

"No! Mai!"

Bou-san raised his hands. "Ka."

He chanted again as he changed his hand position.

"Naumari saba tatakiyateibiyari sarabamokkeibiyari sarabata taraku..."

Ayami-chan...!

"Senda unkikikiki sarabahisananun tarata kanmun!"

The fog started to disperse, and in a moment the black figure disappeared.

Ayami-chan ran toward me. "Mai-chan!"

"Thank goodness..."

I embraced Ayami-chan. Her body was freezing, her teeth chattering.

"Is it gone?" Naru asked Bou-san.

"No, it only released its grip..."

2

"You idiots! We told you to watch Ayami-chan!" Bou-san shouted angrily.

"Sorry, that was so embarrassing..." John admitted, bowing his head.

When Bou-san got to Noriko-san's room, he found John and Ayako fast asleep on the bed like a pair of pigs.

Ayako's voice was sharp. "It couldn't be helped. I just suddenly felt sleepy. When I realized what was happening, I was already asleep. It must be those ghosts' fault. There's no other explanation. I just suddenly felt sleepy... It couldn't be helped."

Meanwhile Naru was examining the tape, his earphones already in place.

"Bou-san, did you see that black figure?"

"I did. It was a woman, not a child."

"Maybe that living room has..."

"A woman."

"Let's not jump to conclusions. Now we know that something is there, and it's not the same kind of spirit as the one in Ayami-chan's room. The lowest temperature recorded was negative twenty degrees— If this were someone else's results, I would not believe them."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm not sure." Naru suddenly stopped the videotape.

"What's wrong?"

Naru rewinded the tape.

"Did you notice something?"

"Quiet. Listen."

We turned toward the screen. Sounds of the cries of children came out of the speakers.

Bou-san stood up.

In the midst of the white fog, a sudden wail sounded. The voices overlapped so that they were unclear. But one thing was true: the children were in pain.

It was saddening just to hear them. They sounded like they were suffering.

In the video, Ayami-chan went into the center of the living room. The cries grew louder.

The children are calling Ayami-chan. They're lonely, sad, and in pain, so they want Ayami-chan to play with them.

"No one told me!" came a woman's voice.

Then there was Bou-san's chanting.

"...My daughter..."

When Bou-san recited the chant, the children's omnipotent cries faded away. The chant had stopped their painful wailing.

"That sound just now...!" Ayako cried out, crossing her arms. "The one in the living room is their boss! That woman, right?!"

"Seems like it," Naru agreed.

Ayako stood up, "Since things have gone this far, call Masako. We must find out that woman's identity."

This time Naru didn't object. "So it has come down to this."

Masako received Ayako's phone call and came here by sunset.

John and I opened the door and welcomed her.

Once we opened the door, the doll-like Masako just gaped at us.

"...Masako, what's wrong?"

Like the last case, she wore a kimono. Her shoulders shuddered.

"Hara-san, do you feel uncomfortable..."

Masako interrupted John's question. "What's wrong here?"

"Huh?"

"It's so strong... It's the first time I've seen a house this bad..."

Huh?

John and I lead the chalk-white girl into base.

The moment we entered, Masako looked at Naru.

...Hey, just give up already...

"Hara-san?" Naru looked at her, his face stoic as usual even though it wasn't with the intention of making her leave.

"It's so... Strong... I feel uncomfortable."

Not particularly caring about the girl's discomfort, Ayako helped her get into a chair to sit down.

"What did you see?"

"I can feel the spirits of many children gathered here. They're all children. On my way here, I saw three children headed toward this house. This is like a congregation of ghost children."

Naru asked Masako, "Can you call them out?"

"There's no need to call them out. All of them are wailing so loudly that I want to plug my ears. What do you want to ask? No matter how much you ask, I'm sure I can help you."

"Minnie... The first child who died here is Tachibana. Call her out."

"If I try to call her down over here, I'll be possessed by a different spirit instead. So please wait a moment. She's called Tachibana, right?" Masako asked as she reached her hand out toward Naru. "Can you lead me to the hall?"

Naru raised his eyebrow, but took Masako's hand.

...Masako, you sly vixen!

We left base and arrived at the hall.

Masako held onto Naru's hand (sorry, I can't help but notice this) as she looked

up at the ceiling.

"Tachibana, are you there?"

She said to the ceiling.

"...Excuse me, but please quiet down."

She spoke again, to the ceiling.

But I didn't hear anything.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew Masako's hair.

"Please, listen to me. Will you please answer my questions? ...What did you say? Please speak louder..."

Suddenly Masako's eyes became unfocused, her face expressionless. Her small mouth opened and closed.

"...Really...so that's how it is? ...Yes, I know now... So that's what happened."

She's talking to herself. It's kind of scary, almost as if she's possessed.

"...Who... Is it? ...That can't be... It's not like that. You can't believe... Right... You can't."

Suddenly a sound came from the floor.

"......!"

We all waited for the moment to come.

What? The sun still didn't set?!

The room began to sway while the rapping sounds started up again. The chandelier rocked along. Bang! Knocking sounds rapped through. Everything was noisy.

"What, what is this!" Ayako shouted.

John ran to the stairs.

"John?!"

John kept going up the stairs, then turned around. "I'm going to check on Ayami-chan!"

The rapping sounds almost completely covered up John's reply. Knocking sounds on the walls and stomping sounds of the floor filled the air.

The floor swayed, and the temperature dropped.

Suddenly

"Tomiko!"

Shouted a voice in the distance.

The sound came closer.

...Masako?!

Masako's face was pale. Her expression was hard to describe, but it was almost like a mask of hatred. Normally her face wouldn't be like that.

And right in front of my eyes, she reached her hand out toward Naru.

"Masako!"

Her hands almost clutched Naru's neck, but then Naru grabbed her. "Bou-san! Stop her! She's been possessed!"

Bou-san stuck his hands together and chanted, "On asanmo ginei un hatta!"

After his recitation, Masako's body became limp.

The rapping sounds stopped.

Bou-san carried the unconscious girl.

3

Masako, now unconscious, lay on the sofa in base.

When we were rewinding the tape, Masako woke up.

"How do you feel?" Naru asked.

Masako shook her head, her face still deathly pale. "I'm fine... I seemed to have been possessed."

"It was due to my negligence. Sorry— Did you find Tachibana?"

"Yes."

Masako nodded, then looked each of us in the eye. "There is a woman's spirit here."

She continued slowly. "The evil spirit is that woman. She's hidden deep inside... At least that's what I think. However, I'm not sure what kind of ghost she is. But I'm positive it's a female spirit."

Masako paused for a moment. "The children's spirits have been gathered here. They're tired of this place, and they want to go home, but they can't because they're lost... Does everyone follow?"

"So basically, the children are stuck here?"

"Yes. The woman's spirit had gathered all the children here. She's pretending to be their mother, and she keeps bringing more kids here. Tachibana realized that she isn't her mother."

...Pretending to be their mother and calling them out here...

"That woman isn't only tricking those kids, but she's also making them bring more children here. She's making the kids pretend to be friends, so that they can bring in more living children. Tachibana is the leader of the children, but she also can't take it anymore. She says she's tired, in pain, and that she can't stand it

anymore."

...That's too much.

Naru asked Masako, "Do you remember calling for Tomiko?"

"Tomiko..." Masako said dazily. "Yes, I remember... That's the woman's child, a daughter in fact... That female spirit is looking for her daughter, Tomiko. That's why she's calling in more children."

"...I see," Naru said quietly before standing up.

"Naru?"

"In other words, that woman is searching for her own daughter, but in the end, she is simply collecting all these children." He said in a hard tone. "Since she can't find her own child, she tricks all these other innocent children into coming, and not only that, she's also utilizing them as tools."

I remembered the children's painful cries of sorrow.

"Those children cannot pass on. That woman won't let them go. They're simply wandering in Chuute... They can't go anywhere," Naru continued.

"...Ah," Bou-san nodded in agreement.

"Ghosts that are lingering around do not know that they have died. It's the same with those children. To those children, they believe they are lost, not dead. That's why they want to go home..."

"That woman knows this and is using it to her advantage by pretending to be their mother. She knows that she's not going to Heaven, and that she will just suffer."

The children already know they're trapped. But they can't escape. Even though they've had enough. Even though it's painful, that woman won't release them.

Naru picked up his jacket.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going out for a while. I don't know when I'm coming back. Take care of Ayami-chan."

"Naru!"

I didn't even have time to call out to him.

And like a gust of wind, Naru left the room. We quietly saw him off.

4

"What is that guy doing?!" Bou-san shouted.

"...What does he want to do anyway. It's almost dark."

Bou-san said to Ayako in a sarcastic manner, "It doesn't matter what he wants to do. In the end, he always puts all his effort into his work."

Then he looked up. "Well, let's just do this then. Tonight Ayami-chan should sleep in a hotel."

"Wouldn't that create problems?"

"At least it'll be safer than sleeping at home. John can stay at the hotel. Last time, John's prayer gave that guy a hard time finding Ayami-chan. If the distance is greater, it might be more effective. Make a charm, get Ayako to help, and place the charm on the hotel room. That way, those spirits won't be able to enter."

"Okay."

"Ayako, go to the hotel and help John. I still haven't seen you be useful yet. Can you really exorcise ghosts?"

Ayako replied gruffly, "...Perhaps I have something up my sleeve."

"Then you can be John's partner. Masako, go with them." Bou-san turned around and looked at Masako.

"Me?"

"These two idiots are too susceptible to the ghosts. If things end up like before, we'll really be in trouble. Go with them. If a ghost shows up, wake the two up."

"I got it." Ayako stood up. "Then, what about you?"

"Since the prayer seemed to be effective, I'm going to try an exorcism." He said before shooting a glance at me. "Jou-chan, help me prepare."

It was already dusk, and the night was imminent. I would have to be faster with the preparations than usual.

Noriko-san packed up and took Ayami-chan with her to a hotel.

Before they left, Ayako had made a protective charm— With a pen, she wrote some strange characters— Right now, Ayami-chan is holding it.

"This way, those spirits won't be able to see Ayami-chan."

Skeptical about Ayako's charm, I asked Masako, "Do those things work?"

"Those charms seem to be effective. —Don't worry. Those ghosts didn't even notice."

We saw the five people off, then started to prepare for the exorcism. We spent a good amount of time moving all the furniture out and setting up the altar.

"Hey, Bou-san, what's a Chuute?"

I asked him while taking out some equipment.

"The crevice between the living world and the after world."

"I don't get it."

Bou-san sighed. "You still don't understand anything— Give me those three handles."

"This?"

"It's a crevice. In Buddhism, after someone dies he will stay in this place for forty nine days after his death. It's a place where one cannot be cleansed. It's like a bridge between the living and the dead. Now do you understand?"

"Kind of."

"This doesn't always happen to people facing death. It's like going around the Gates of Hell and then coming back. Haven't you heard of this before?"

"Yeah, I did."

"The experience of near death. Some people will say they've experienced something like this: They're standing beside a river, and there's a bridge. Many people are crossing the bridge, but they themselves do not cross it. Then they

wake up."

"Yeah, yeah." I've heard that before.

"So in the end, when the deceased person crosses the bridge, he goes into the other world. After crossing the bridge, he will forget all the pain he's experienced in this world and start a whole new life in the next world. But some people do not want to cross the bridge because they have some unfinished business."

"Like finding your daughter..."

Just like that woman who's trying to find Tomiko.

After dying, your spirit stays in that place.

Since you didn't cross that bridge, you can't forget the pain you suffered when you were alive. Your hardships and fear can't be forgotten either.

"So that's what a ghost is...?"

"Correct."

"Since that woman wants to find her daughter, she didn't cross the bridge, and that's why she called all these children here. She's not releasing the children, and that's why they aren't able to see the bridge."

"...Isn't that infuriating?"

"Don't be angry," Bou-san said.

I looked into his eyes.

Bou-san managed to put a smile on his face. "Aren't we trying hard to get her to see the bridge?"

"I guess so."

After helping out Bou-san, I went over to Lin-san and moved the equipment in Ayami-chan's room to the living room. After I finished moving the equipment, I went to base to help Lin-san make preparations. When we finished making all the wire connections, Bou-san started his exorcism.

Good luck~ Cleanse that woman, set the children free~

And let Ayami-chan live a normal life.

A few moments after Bou-san started his exorcism, sounds filled the room. At the same time the temperature dropped.

The cold air accumulated along the floor. In the thermography graph, the floor was blue.

The video camera moved too, and combined with the thermography chart, we could see the places where the temperature was the lowest.

The video cameras faced the middle of the room and the floor right in front of the window.

...The temperature is lowest at...

Suddenly a sound came from the living room, a rapping sound. It was almost like a shock wave. The floor rocked, as did Bou-san.

And then a sound vibrated through the entire room.

Stomp, stomp, stomp... The sound of somebody running. A smoky substance started to fill the room. The thermography chart showed a dark blue color.

The altar swayed, then fell to the ground.

"Bou-san, forget it! Leave the living room!"

I shouted into the microphone.

"Idiot! How can you ask a man to run away!"

Is now the time to argue about that?

The smoke thickened, and Bou-san's body became hard to see. The mournful cries of the children filled the room.

I stared at the TV.

A black shadow appeared in the middle of the room, behind Bou-san. It slowly started to form into a shape.

"Bou-san! Your back! It's that woman!"

Bou-san turned around and looked straight through the black figure.

It's dangerous! He can't see her!

I quickly stood up.

"Taniyama-san, don't go!" Lin-san shouted as he tried to stop me.

How can I not go!

I ran to the living room and opened the door.

And just like yesterday night, the room was covered in smoke...

"Bou-san, are you okay?"

"Idiot! Why did you come!!"

Because...

The room swayed violently. I lost my balance as the floor distorted.

It's dangerous!

"Bou-san! Hey, you have to leave!"

I walked into the room.

I can't see... The dark figure... What do I do? I could only see it through the video camera. I weakly walked toward Bou-san.

When my hand reached out toward him, it felt like my hand went through something. The air felt cold and sticky.

And then I heard some words in my mind.

...Do not hinder me.

...How dare you.

...This is inexcusable...

Suddenly my body froze, and my hand, which was reaching for Bou-san, wouldn't move.

A pair of hands encircled my neck... Icy-cold hands.

Her? ...Is it her?

I grabbed the woman's hands around my neck.

Bou-san turned around and pulled out some golden beads.

"Na u ma ku sa man da baza ra dan kan!"

The hands clutching my neck disappeared, and all that was left was a cold feeling.

"Are you alright?"

I nodded and grabbed Bou-san's hand. "Let's go! Forget it! It's too dangerous!"

This time he stood up and ran toward the door. Because now, the floor was swaying so much it was almost impossible to stand up.

The floor was rocking, distorting.

Ah—! Suddenly my feet caved in.

I tried to crawl as if I were swimming. The floor beneath my feet was giving away.

"Mai!"

When I was trying to crawl forwards, the floor cracked again.

Bou-san steadied me and pulled my hand. He then tossed me to the door the way someone would toss a cat or dog.

After Bou-san left the room, the noise in the living room stopped.

We were speechless as we sat almost paralyzed in the hallway.

The smoke in the room faded away too.

After the smoke faded away, we noticed there was a hole on the floor in the middle of the room, right in front of the windows. The floor cracked open, revealing a huge hole.

It was the place where the thermography indicated was the coldest. The origin of the cold.

Bou-san abruptly ran out.

"Bou-san?"

"I'm going to call Ayako. Those ghosts might've gone to find Ayami-chan again."

"Ayami-chan's location... Why..."

"When I ran out of the room... What was that! It felt like I went through that

woman's body."

...Ah! Me too!

"That woman just came in all of a sudden. Maybe she knows where Ayami-chan is."

5

When Bou-san ran to the telephone, the telephone rang.

...My heart felt heavy. I had a bad feeling about this.

Hesitating, Bou-san slowly picked up the phone.

—The ghosts found Ayami-chan.

What they were doing was very clear and simple.

They suddenly appeared out of nowhere and tried to push Ayami-chan out of the window from the fifteenth floor.

John quickly held onto Ayami-chan, and the two were violently tugged toward the window.

What saved them was neither Ayako nor Masako.

The window in the hotel was thick and strong, and that is what kept the two safe from the ghosts' attacks.

At dawn, we stared at the pit in the floor.

In order to confirm the disaster from last night, we went to the living room again, with the exception of Naru. He still didn't contact us.

There was a well beneath the hole.

The diameter was about 1.5 meters, and the opening was made of stone. The depth was about three meters.

"This is a well that had been buried underneath the house," Bou-san told Ayako.

"Seems like it. It's also rather old."

There was nothing in the well. Of course there was no water either. The only thing there was some dry dirt and some tools that dropped.

I poked their shoulders. "Hey, could this be..."

"The well that she died in...?"

"Yes."

"I don't know, but that might be the case," Bou-san replied.

Ayako added, "It'd be easy if that were true. All we have to do is dig up the corpse."

"Ah...but if you want to dig it up, we can't just rely on ourselves. We'll need to call in the specialists."

Masako looked at the well with a dazed look. She must be seeing something from the other world. Suddenly her face paled, and she moved away from the well.

"What's wrong?" asked Bou-san.

"I don't think... I can see the bottom of this well."

Huh?

"Deep inside the well... The ghost children are at the bottom... It's almost as if countless corpses have been piled on top of each other..."

...God...

"Do those ghosts look like they'll come out?"

"I don't know... But they won't be coming out as of now..."

Shivering slightly, Ayako let out an exasperated sigh. "Where did that Naru run off to!"

...How would I know.

"When will he be back!" Ayako demanded again.

"Oh, Ayako, do you feel uneasy when Naru's not around?" Bou-san chuckled while Ayako threw him a hard look.

"Do. Not. Joke. Around. You make it sound like I'm a little child who needs protection."

"You mean you're not?"

"Of course not! How would that happen!"

...Ayako, you're overreacting a bit.

"Eh... No matter how I think of it, you'll just like a ten year old." Bou-san smiled wryly.

"It's only a six year age difference."

"Whatever the case, your ages do not match," Masako interrupted.

Ayako glared at Masako, "Don't you know that guys his age tend to go for older girls?"

"Does that line of reasoning even make sense?" Masako shot back.

"Oh, so now you're showing your true self? Masako-chan, what can you be to Naru anyway?"

"I hoped you wouldn't talk me like that.. In any case, Matsuzaki-san, you're already so old, yet..."

"Stop playing around with me. I know that with your personality, there's no way Naru would fall for you."

"My personality is better than a certain old woman's." ...You guys need to stop right now! Don't you agree that now isn't the time to be talking about this?

John interceded, "Shibuya-san puts his heart into his work. So about what you two are saying... He shouldn't be interested, right?"

"Right," Bou-san agreed, smiling, "with the way he is, he must not be dating anyone."

...Well said.

I thought.

"He went on a date before," Masako asserted.

...What? How would you know?

"We went out together numerous times." The doll-like girl smiled.

"...You're kidding." Ayako's eyes were open wide.

"How rude. Well, you can go ask Kazuya-san yourself."

...Kazuya-san...?!

For a moment there, I had to think about who this Kazuya-san was. When I realized it was Naru, everything became black.

Everyone stared at Masako.

After calming down, Ayako continued, "But it's because of work, right?"

...Yes, yes. That must be it.

"Well, movies and concerts are not related to work."

...Movies? Concerts? Naru, who doesn't even watch TV, went out to see the movies? But, when you put it that way, isn't that a date!

I immediately pictured Masako's evil grin in my head.

Shocked speechless, we didn't move.

The first one who recovered was John.

"Well, Shibuya-san's at that age now so dating is a regular notion. Anyway, when is he coming back?"

...John, you don't sound confident yourself.

"So basically," Bou-san resumed solemnly, "when Naru comes back doesn't concern us."

He looked around at everybody. "It doesn't matter if he's not here. He's not a psychic; he's just a paranormal researcher. Even if he is here, he can't exorcise ghosts or protect Ayami-chan."

"...But!"

"Things are going to be the same, whether or not he's here. Right now, we must decide if we're going to exorcise the ghosts or run away."

"....."

Everyone was thinking.

"Let's try it again. Ayako, John, which one of you will take up the challenge? Speak up clearly. Those ghosts in the living room are tough."

Ayako glanced at Bou-san.

"So you're saying you want to do it?" asked Bou-san.

Ayako responded, "Go to Ayami-chan. I can't protect her. Also, John, you should be there protecting her as well."

"Got it."

6

Bou-san and I pulled the altar out of the hole and helped Ayako prepare for her exorcism.

"Can we still use this?"

"Well, I guess."

After we set up the altar, Bou-san and John went to the hotel. Ayako, I, and that person who drifts off to different places— Lin-san, were left behind.

Ayako changed into her priestess kimono in base.

"Hey, Mai-chan?"

Huh? ...Mai...-chan?

"Do you want to stay in the living room to watch me do the prayer?" Ayako asked with her back turned towards me.

"Ah, you're scared. What kind of medium are you~"

"I'm not scared!"

She turned toward me, her face hard with determination. Sadly, that same face crumbled.

"I'm not...scared...only..."

"It's okay. I'll go with you."

"Thank goodness."

She looked at the mountain-pile of equipment. "Lin-san, can you..."

"I left it there to record data," Lin-san informed us in a cold tone.

"...What a personality. Just like the boss. That "lady-killer"."

"Huh...?" It seemed like Lin-san didn't understand Ayako. His eyes were open

wide in confusion.

"Oh, nevermind. I was just saying your boss is a pervert— Mai, let's go!"

Ayako grabbed my hand and pulled me out with her.

...Hey, Ayako, you don't really like Naru that way, right?

Under the rosy afterglow of the sunset, Ayako started her prayer. The scarlet light lingered in the room. It gave me a bad feeling.

"Here I humbly offer a modest cleansing ritual and enshrine this temporary altar..."

When the exorcism started, faint sounds filled the room.

A chill covered the floor. Sitting near the door, I felt a chill on my back. My feet became colder.

I looked at the video camera, which was facing the old well. The cold air must be coming from that well.

As the swaying became more evident, noises arose from the floor.

Ayako's voice was terse. "In the sacred presence of his Majesty... Emperor of... Yamato, who reigns..."

It was freezing. And I had three layers of clothing on. The trees in the courtyard swayed, casting a shadow into the living room. A dark mist conjured in the middle of the room.

"Ayako! Don't stop!"

"Don't say that so easily!"

Quickly Ayako regained her composure. Rapping noises sounded nearby. It was getting colder. My breathing came out as white fog.

"Over the Land of the Eight Grand Islands as the living god..."

The sun was sinking as Ayako proceeded with her prayer. Soon the room was covered in darkness. The only light left was the flickering of the candles.

A wispy gaseous figure came into view. Frightened, I could hardly breathe.

"Ah!" Ayako screamed, jumping up.

"Ayako!"

"Someone touched my shoulder!"

Don't jump because of something small like that!

"Calm down! You're a priestess!"

I felt a cold presence tug on my hands.

I shrieked.

Someone's breath. I felt completely surrounded.

The room swayed incessantly as thumping sounds restarted.

Ayako and I slowly tried to step out of the room. We had to give up.

"Mai, it's too dangerous here! Let's go!"

"Yeah...Yeah."

Ayako dashed out.

At the same time, the floor swayed intensely. I fell onto the ground.

The floor rocked back and forth.

I touched my injured kneecaps.

"Mai! Hurry up!" Ayako called out from the door.

"Okay!"

The moment I tried to stand up, the floor swayed harder. I can't stand up!

"Mai!"

I tried to stand again, but then a pair of hands grabbed my feet.

I shrieked.

Turning around, I saw the wispy smoke encircle my ankle.

Using all my strength, I tried to shrug off the smoke, but it didn't work. It felt like someone was clutching my feet. My hands were sweaty. My ankle was freezing.

"Ayako! Help me!"

"Mai!"

I was being pulled backwards.

Behind me was the well.

Another pair of hands grasped my ankle as I was tugged backwards into the hole.

"No!"

I yelled as I grabbed onto the floor with all my strength.

Ayako screamed frantically.

"Taniyama-san!"

Lin-san rushed in.

"Help me!"

He ran to me and stretched out his hand. But I couldn't reach it.

The eerie hand grabbing my foot pulled harder. My bones almost cracked. I was going to fall into the well.

"...Lin-san! Ah! I'm going to fall!"

"Taniyama-san!"

Lin-san leaned forward and stretched out his hand. Right when our hands almost touched, a force pulled me down. My waist was already inside the well. Save me! I'm going to fall!

I remembered their nest. The center of the cold. The depths of the well. All the little children, stuck down there.

The floor swayed violently, taking down Lin-san and Ayako. Then I was falling. The well was up to my chest now as I grabbed onto the floorboards.

No, I'm going to fall!

It was hard trying to hold onto the hard floor. The rough edges cut into my hands. I felt helpless. "Mai!!"

Suddenly a force pulled me backwards, my body fell past the opening of the well, and my hold on the floor broke.

.....!

I didn't even have time to scream.

I reached my hand out toward the opening as I lunged down into the darkness.

I could hear the voices of two people.

But their words were unclear...

Chapter 4 - Woman, To You I Give a Child

1

...It's dark.

This isn't Noriko-san's house because I see a sliding door.

Beyond the porch was a backyard with a pond. It looked like the one in Noriko-san's house...

A girl was playing in the backyard. I couldn't see clearly because of my blurry vision. But I could tell that she was almost Ayami-chan's age. She was also wearing a kimono. What time era is this?

"Tomiko! Tomiko!"

A woman's cry rang from inside the house. Her face became distorted.

It's dangerous! Don't go with him!

The man and girl exchanged a few words, and then the man took the girl's hand and walked off with her.

The shrill cry from the house continued.

Don't go! You can't go with him! I tried to shout, but no sounds came out.

The man walked away as he held onto the girl's hand. They went toward the pond.

The girl vanished into the distance.

"Tomiko!"

A cry of misery. Ah, it's my voice. That was me.

I dashed outside. White fog engulfed the pond, and I couldn't see anything.

My tears fell as I bent down. I lowered my head and realized there was a well. Deep inside the well, water was flowing.

A woman brushing her hair was reflected by the water.

The woman's teardrops rippled the water's surface.

I unconsciously faced the room to see the weeping woman.

I felt sad for her. She must've wanted to go there so much. I was about to walk there, but then a pair of hands stopped me.

Turning around, I saw Naru staring back at me. His eyes looked pained. He shook his head, the sadness evident in his face.

I turned back to see the woman.

Sobbing and whimpering, she leaned against the well.

Crying, crying... She cried out before jumping into the well.

The sound of water dripping.

...Then I woke up.

What was that just now?

I knew it was a dream, but why would I dream about that?

I slowly stood up, and my entire body ached.

This is...the bottom of the well.

And then a sound came from above.

"Mai! Are you okay?!"

Ayako leaned against the well. She was worried about me.

Suddenly I remembered the woman's painful cry from my dream.

"I'm fine! But I can't climb back up!"

"Lin is finding something to help you out! Are you really okay?"

"Yeah."

After I replied, I heard some footsteps. Lin-san quickly appeared. His hands held onto the well as he agilely made his way down.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nope."

Without smiling, he nodded and looked back up at Ayako.

"Throw the chair down here."

Ayako tossed the chair into the well.

While standing, I thought for a moment.

...The buried well.

I immediately understood.

This well is the same one that woman jumped into.

Since her child disappeared, she commited suicide because of the pain.

And then she became a ghost. And now she's still looking for her child...

Standing on the chair, Lin-san reached his hand out toward me.

I was finally on the ground again.

"What time...is it now?"

I asked Ayako while I pondered over whether or not I should wear a skirt in the next case.

"It's 10:00. We've just started work."

...That means I didn't stay in the well for long... That dream only lasted a few minutes.

*

"Kidnapping?"

Ayako asked as she cleaned my leg wound.

"Yeah, that's what I think. Tomiko was kidnapped, and then her mother jumped into the well to commit suicide. What a vivid dream, right?"

"Did you hit your head?" Ayako giggled. "You're not even a medium so does your dream even count?"

Bastard. Who was the one freaking out earlier.

Lin-san contemplated, "...Even though we don't know if it's true...it could serve as a valuable clue."

"Ah, so you think so too?" I asked.

Lin-san was still deep in thought.

"Hey, what do you think? I doubt we can purify this place," Ayako admitted.

"....."

"Hey!"

"...I don't think we can force them out," he finally spoke, "we should wait until Naru comes back before we attempt another exorcism. Exorcisms use brute force, which is why they always try to resist us."

"...Aren't there other ways? First of all, we don't even know when Naru will be back," Ayako replied.

"Naru has a clear idea of our situation. He wouldn't loaf around and waste time so he'll definitely be back soon."

"...You sure have faith in your boss."

Lin-san shot a cold glare at Ayako. "Naru has never let anyone down before. That's why I believe him."

Turning toward me, he continued in his cold tone, "Rest for a while. Your head might hurt after your fall."

"Okay."

Actually, my whole body ached so much I could barely stand it. I obediently lay on the sofa.

2

I was floating, drifting.

I opened my eyes.

In the dark room, I could hear the whirring sounds of the equipment. I was looking at our base.

The person sitting in front of the equipment was Naru, not Lin-san.

Naru's not supposed to be here. He didn't come back yet. I must be half-asleep...in that case, I can't wake up.

I looked at Naru. He was smiling.

Ah, how I love the way he smiles. The real Naru would never smile that way.

"Naru?" I asked while lying down.

Naru cocked his head, as if wondering why I asked this way.

"Can we save Ayami-chan?"

If we're defeated, then Ayami-chan will be taken away by that woman, just like all those other dead children.

"Everything will be fine," Naru reassured me with a smile.

"Did you go on a date with Masako?"

...Ahhh, what am I saying at a time like this.

Naru smiled again. "You're mistaken."

Such a warm smile. I was satisifed with this.

...I'm glad it's just a misunderstanding...

Suddenly I heard a sound. The door in our base opened.

This time I was really awake.

Hurriedly, I shot up from the sofa.

Naru had just come back.

...Huh? Am I still asleep?

Naru looked at me. "Are you awake?"

Not even a slight tone of warmth.

Hmph. It's the real thing.

"You came back?!"

"If I didn't come back, how would I be here."

...Ah, sorry. That was a dumb question.

Naru faced Lin-san now. "Lin, replay the recording."

"Okay."

Lin-san sat in front of the equipment. That same empty seat.

Bou-san and company came in too. John and Masako, who were supposed to be guarding Ayami-chan, was also here.

"What about Ayami-chan?" I asked.

Bou-san shrugged in response. "Naru said we could come back and leave her with Noriko-san."

...What?!

"Naru! Is it okay if we just leave those two there?"

"It shouldn't be a problem," Naru responded bluntly.

"What do you mean 'it shouldn't be a problem'...how irresponsible."

"Tonight this case will be solved." He looked back at me with his deep, profound eyes. There was no worry and no hesitation.

"Will it succeed?!"

"Did you think I was out doing nothing the past few days?" He retorted disdainfully. "Even with this many people, everything is still a mess."

...Your personality really sucks.

Unconvinced, Ayako inquired, "Are you sure this will work? You don't know everything so some things might be unclear. That woman isn't an easy one to deal with."

Naru's eyes were overflowing with contempt. "I knew from the start that the woman was no ordinary ghost. From a poltergeist standpoint, it was obvious."

For a moment Ayako had nothing else to say so Bou-san pursued it instead, "Well, let's listen to your strategy and decide whether or not it's good."

Not looking at the T.V. anymore, Naru crossed his arms. "The situation is obvious. That woman wants to find her child."

Ayako interrupted, "We don't know anything about that. The problem is, how do we get her to give up?"

"As long as we give her the child, things will be okay."

"What?!"

"If that child is here, that woman will be satisfied and pass on."

"And where...would that child be? How old is she now? We probably won't find her."

"Are you implying that (with my intelligence) I did not think of this? Bringing Tomiko here would not only be impossible, but also meaningless. Even if she sees Tomiko now, she might not recognize her."

"...Then what do you mean..."

Naru ignored Ayako. "Hara-san, how's the situation now?"

Masako listened carefully for a moment. "The living room...They're still in the living room. They haven't tried to go to the hotel yet..."

Ayako butted back into the conversation, "Hey, why don't we consider our safety first?!"

Naru shot her a cold glare. "Well, that's not something a professional would say."

"Even professionals have limits! This place is dangerous! I've seen many haunted house, and this is the first time I've seen one this bad."

...Then what about Ayami-chan? Are you going to leave her to die?!

I turned toward Bou-san.

Bou-san calmly nodded his head. "If we don't handle this situation carefully, we may become jibakurei ourselves—"

"...Hey!"

I was about to interrupt him, but then Ayako beat me to it. "Quitting while you're ahead is also a strategy!"

"But!"

I was about to continue, but then Naru calmly called me out. "Mai, anyone who wants to go home can leave. I do not want to work with mediums of that caliber."

Ayako was fuming.

Bou-san pressed Naru, "So will your plan be successful?"

"Whether or not you trust me is your choice," Naru replied in a cold tone.

Bou-san and Miko-san exchanged glances.

"Okay..." Bou-san stood up. "Then I'll just trust you. I'll suffer through this again and try to exorcise the ghost."

"Oh, forget it. I'll join too..." Ayako murmered hesitantly as she stood up.

"Try our best. At least until we fall," Bou-san offered.

"I'll bury your corpse."

"If it's a Shinto style burial, you'll never live down the shame."

...Talkative bastard. But now that things are working out, I'm thankful.

3

"So what will we be doing?" asked Bou-san.

Naru instructed us, "As of now, we have enough manpower. The underlying problem is the woman. If we don't bring her out, everything we do will be meaningless."

"How do we bring her out?" Ayako retorted.

"Disperse the children," he said in his sharp voice, "Miko-san, can you make some charms?"

"Of course I can. Even though the ones I stuck in the hotel were useless earlier."

"First, make a significant amount of charms."

"I'm telling you this will fail," complained Ayako.

"It's okay. John will assist us."

"Okay, but..." John murmered.

Naru patted John's back, cutting him off. "Perform another exorcism."

"What?!"

"The idea isn't to prevent the ghosts from get near Ayami-chan. It was to not let the ghosts leave the house in the first place."

Bou-san blinked his eyes in surprise. "I don't know if that will work."

"It doesn't necessarily need to strong. Just good enough to keep the spirits from leaving and to leave the Demon's Gate open."

"What's the Demon's Gate?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Quiet, Mai."

"I want to know."

"Located in the northeast quarter, it's the gate in which evil spirits leave through. Originally it's the easiest place to leave, and since the charms will be blocking all other passages of exit, the ghosts that are heading toward the hotel will have to pass through the Demon's Gate, —Bou-san and Miko-san will disperse the spirits leaving the Demon's Gate."

"So you want us to disperse the spirits that leave the Demon's Gate?"

"That's right. All you have to do is disperse them."

Ayako commented, "We can't solve the problem this way. Even if we do disperse the spirits, they will end up accumulating anyway."

"Don't worry. As long as we temporarily reduce the amount of spirits near that woman, it'll be okay. John, go to the living room and disperse the spirits there."

"Got it."

Naru nodded and stood up.

Bou-san called him, "Hey, I understand that we handle the childrens' spirits, but who will be doing the most important exorcism of that woman?"

...That's right. Bou-san and Miko-san are all outside the room, while John will be staying inside. But he can't do it by himself. But then Naru said things wil be okay if we disperse the spirits.

"Can it be...Naru, are you doing it?"

Naru smirked confidently and softly clapped his hands together. "We're starting."

It was 4:00 AM.

Charms were pasted all over the walls. To prevent the ghosts from leaving through the living room, John stayed in the living room and sprinkled holy water. He recited the prayer used earlier on Ayami-chan. At that time, the spirits couldn't immediately find Ayami-chan; instead, they just wandered around. Even though in the end, his spell was still broken.

Outside, Bou-san and Miko-san had stuck their charms onto the house. There were also charms in the hotel Ayami-chan was staying in. Even though in the end, they will probably break.

Only one place wasn't sealed by charms. The Demon's Gate.

And that's where Bou-san and Miko-san are.

John and Naru were in the living room while Lin-san looked over the equipment.

Naru told me and Masako to stay in base, but Masako insisted on being in the living room.

"Mai, the living room will be sort of dangerous. Stay with Hara-san. Things will be troublesome if she gets possessed."

Recalling Naru's words, I followed Masako to the living room.

It was dawn, and the sun was almost up. Even if the sky didn't seem much lighter.

What is Naru planning? That woman is looking for her daughter—Tomiko. Since Tomiko isn't here, she won't give up. She can't cross the bridge into the other world. If she finds Tomiko, she'll be happy and satisfied enough to leave for the other world. —But, how can we do that?

Tomiko's not here. She might not even be in the living world anymore.

"John," Naru called out, urging him to start.

John nodded and started his prayer, which I've seen many times already.

Not long afterwards, the room became foggy and the sounds began.

It's starting...

I looked around and didn't see any shadows or ghosts. The only indication that they were here was the warping sounds coming from the ground. Knocking sounds on the wall and thumping sounds in the furniture started too. Masako's face was pale white. If you're so scared, you should've stayed in base.

"Are you okay? Do you want to go back to base?" I whispered.

Masako shook her head. "No, I'm fine... I'll stay here."

You want to stay with Naru that badly?

I really wanted to say something cold to her. I'm scared too~ Being pulled into

the well was a bad enough experience.

"There are two ways to exorcise spirits..." Masako explained, her eyes searching the room. "Cleansing them and removing them. Cleansing them involves talking with the spirit and finding out why they can't cross the bridge. But this is something that only a medium can do."

"Naru's not a medium, but he wants to exorcise the ghost," she continued to explain.

"Exorcise it?"

"Killing it with brute force..."

A different method? Persuading them is the same as cleansing them. And to not pay any attention to the spirit's troubles is killing it.

"I hope he doesn't kill them, at least not in front of me."

Masako can see the spiritual world. To her, spirits and humans are the same. She doesn't want to see a human die or a spirit getting killed. That's Masako.

...Even if I don't really understand it, I guess this is the way it is.

When Masako and I were softly talking to each other, the rapping sounds grew louder.

Footsteps sounded from the floor. The sound of children trying to run away.

A cold layer of air enshrouded the floor, as white, wispy smoke hovered about the floor, encircling the entire room. In the middle a vague, lone figure started to materialize.

Sorrowful cries filled my ears. The desperate cries became louder.

John's prayer was making them flee.

"......!"

Someone tapped my shoulder, but when I turned around, no one was there. My hair was being pulled.

I wasn't the only one either. John constantly turned around, sprinkling holy water every time in order to push the spirit away.

The barrier was working.

The floor distorted, and I couldn't help but sway along with it. A flash of light shone on the wall.

The room swang intensely.

...It's too strong!

The sudden shaking of the floor made me lose my balance as I was lounged into the air. John and the others were struggling too.

I could feel someone clutching onto my wrist. I tried to pull my hand back, but then an unseen force tugged me back onto the ground.

"Mai-san!" John cried out as he turned around and sprinkled holy water in my direction.

The force on my wrist vanished. The smoke engulfed the entire room.

John didn't stop his prayer. The objects the smoke was moving were dropped temporarily.

"Hara-san! What's the situation?!" Naru turned to look at Masako.

"They're running away. The amount of spirits has decreased dramatically... They're leaving the the living room."

The remaining spirits cried as they left. I was probably the only one who heard them.

The ghosts moved slugglishly. They were all trapped in this house, with no where to go. They couldn't go back to their house. They were sad, lonely spirits who called out to more children. And now John's prayer was hurting them.

...I kind of understand Masako's feelings now. Those children are too pitiful. Loneliness and sorrow... They keep getting pushed around.

Same for the woman. Trapped in her own sadness, she couldn't stop looking for Tomiko, and now she had created a snaring trap of sorrow.

But we can't leave things as is. We can't turn the living Ayami-chan over. There's no way we can do that. We won't let Ayami-chan become one of those dead childrens' playmates.

The mist in the living room started to dissipate. This is proof that the number of spirits are decreasing. The spirits were pushed away with the help of John, Bou-san, and Ayako.

"Can't you cleanse them?" I asked.

Masako shook her head. "It can't be done... As long as that woman is here, it can't be done. If we don't cleanse that woman first..."

Masako abruptly took a deep breath, her blanched face reflecting her fear. She stared at the well.

"...She's coming..."

And then there was silence.

A thin wispy mist drifted our direction.

We held our breath.

And then an empty sound filled the air.

Water drops in the well could be heard. And then, a voice bellowed.

The well—

A bluish light floated above the well.

A transient figure arose.

We all stared. It was an indistinct figure of a woman. Her hair was wrapped up in a bun, and her lanky figure was covered in a kimono. She looked like she might disappear any minute.

"Tomiko-san isn't here!" Masako exclaimed. "She's not here anymore!"

The figure lowered her head, but didn't respond.

"Please understand! Tomiko-san isn't here!" Masako cried out desperately.

"These children aren't Tomiko-san! Please release them! They all want to return to their mothers!"

Masako stopped.

The transient figure was halfway up from the well; the edge of the well reached her waist. Small white things appeared on the brim of the well. It was as if they

were larva. White, small, childrens'...fingers.

The little fingers reached for the floor.

They want to come up.

On the other side was another pair of fingers. And another, and another... The edge of the well was covered with little, white fingers as the children tried their best to get out.

"No! Don't come here!" Masako shouted.

I was rendered speechless.

John stood in front of us as he prepared to sprinkle the holy water again. Suddenly a force knocked him off his feet.

"John!" I cried out.

And then, the woman whose head was lowered started to raise her head.

Eyes filled with hatred. She didn't hear Masako at all. She was still concentrated on finding Tomiko. She had no plans of leaving until then.

Her gloomy eyes swept the floor. They stopped at the black figure near the door.

A figure black as night. A pallid face.

Naru stared back at the woman. His dark eyes were full of confidence.

Naru raised his right hand.

"Naru, stop! Please wait!" Masako cried out.

Naru didn't bother looking at Masako. He just stared at the woman, his arm raised high, flashing the object in his hand to the ghost. The woman watched Naru's movements intensively.

"Your daughter is here," Naru calmly announced.

There was a wooden board cut in the shape of a human in his hand. A spell paper was pasted on it.

The woman stared at the wooden piece.

"Take those children...with you as well."

Naru tossed the wooden piece into the air.

The woman cried out.

The wooden figurine spun in the darkness, slowly spinning toward the woman. The blurred trajectory faded into a figure. —The figure of a child.

I get it now. That's Tomiko.

The woman hunched back and reached out for the child. Tomiko ran into the woman's arms.

The air in the room began to revolve counterclockwise.

The woman spun too, her hands wispy like smoke. The moment her faded hands touched Tomiko, a white light flashed.

"......!"

What happened? What was that light?

The woman embraced Tomiko. A white light emanated from them.

The woman hugged the wooden figurine; I couldn't see her expression. But from the way she held her head and shoulders...she looked satisfied.

A white light encircled the woman. She melted into the brightness.

The light engulfed the entire room.

A warm, serene light. It wasn't blinding at all. It was just very warm.

The light slowly faded away.

The misty children's figure appeared distinct for a moment in the white light. Soon after, they too disappeared into the light.

I saw it. In the midst of the fog, I saw the smiles of the children.

The white light dissipated, leaving the dusky room the way it was before it all happened.

Masako stood up.

"...They're gone...the spirits have been cleansed...!"

4

...Dawn came.

We were in the living room, looking at the hole in the floor.

"Masako, what's the situation?" Ayako asked.

Masako smiled slightly. "...Everything's fine. There are no more spirits here..."

We sat on the floor. Everyone was quiet. We had no more energy left. We all just sat there, a bit dazed.

"...How did it get cleansed?" Ayako mumbled.

Naru replied, "Because her wish was fulfilled."

"Wish?"

"Of finding her daughter."

...I don't get it.

I poked Naru, "Hey, what was that wooden figure?"

"It's a paper effigy," Bou-san interrupted. "In other words: a human figure, an idol, the shape of a human carved in wood, a puppet..."

Ayako continued, "It's wood cut in the shape of a human. It represents the person being cursed. It's a method to curse, like a voodoo doll."

Naru looked irritated.

Heh heh, seems like I'm not the only one who doesn't get it.

Naru started to explain. "There are white spells and black spells. White spells help people, while black spells harm them. Oftentimes the same spell can be used to harm or help people."

"That's right. It's the same thing when you get rid of an enemy in Esoteric Buddhism," Bou-san mused.

...Oh.

"But, how do human effigies and cleansing relate?" I asked.

"Human effigies are basically vessels to hold spirits. Do you know what a vessel is?" Bou-san asked.

"Not really."

"It's a place to store a soul. If a human effigy were made to represent you, it would take all the damage that you receive, and vice versa. This is what a human effigy is. It was originally used for Daughter's Day[1], on March 3rd."

"Ah~"

"That human effigy represented Tomiko. That woman thought it was her daughter, and so she believed she found her daughter. That's how she was cleansed."

"So basically, she was tricked?"

"Hey! You can't say it like that," Bou-san shouted out.

"But, wasn't it a fake?"

"You can't really say that. If I put a nail in a human effigy representing you, then Mai, you'll die. That being the case, it's considered real. I'll just leave it at that. When the spirit is cleansed, it can't come back. It'll stay in the other world. —Got it?"

"Yes... I think I understand, but I'm not sure."

"It's amazing that you can make one. Is that why you left earlier?" Bou-san asked Naru.

"That's right. In order to find her birth and death dates," Naru confirmed.

"The human effigy was successful, meaning you found them, right?"

"Of course. It cost me quite some time. I was able to find the information because this house is on an old street. Otherwise, I'm afraid I wouldn't have found it."

"...Then what's her name?"

"The woman was Oshima Hiro. After her house was torn down, this one was built in its place. Tomiko was her only child. After half a year, Tomiko's body was found in the pond."

"...Was it a kidnapping?" I asked.

Lin-san looked at me.

Naru crossed his arms. "Maybe. That woman..."

"Committed suicide by falling into the well," Ayako chuckled.

Naru looked a bit shocked. "...I'm not sure how she died. She passed away half a year after her daughter was found. The only information I needed was Tomiko's birth and death date; that's what is required for a human effigy."

"Oh..." I murmered as Naru left the living room, followed by Lin-san.

Bou-san looked at the two retreating figures. "I never thought Naru-chan was an onmyouji."

"Onmyouji?" I asked.

"Someone who uses yin and yang... Do you understand?"

"How can I?"

Bou-san smiled wryly. "Well, let's say it this way. It's magic that was introduced into Japan during the Heian Period from China. It's based on yin and yang. One family in particular, the Fujiwara family, perused it often, even though the Shinto religion used it as well. Well, using a human effigy to represent Tomiko was ingenious. Only an omyouji could've done it."

...Oh—

"Impressive, an onmyouji," Ayako appraised.

I turned toward Ayako, "It's impressive?"

"Well, yeah. And a handsome onmyouji too."

...Hehhh, impressive.

I felt exhausted. Silence ensued once again.

And then I finally stood up.

"The scariest thing was that woman," Bou-san sighed.

"Ohh, in that case, the strongest emotion is a mother's love," Ayako remarked.

"Really... Well, forget it. Ah—I'm exhausted. I don't want to encounter something like this again."

"True," Ayako agreed.

Then we left the living room.

When I reached the hallway, I saw Naru on the phone.

"...You can come back anytime. Everything has been solved," he said into the phone.

After he hang up the phone, his eyes fell on me. Eyes deeper than the darkest night.

"Are things really okay now?" I asked.

Naru's eyes were warm as he replied, "Yes, everything's fine now."

"Okay."

On his side was Bou-san, who was stretching. "Naru-chan, are you getting ready to leave?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Naru?" Ayako asked. "I heard you and Masako are dating. Is it true?"

"Dating?"

"Did you go on a date with her? You know, movies and concerts. Young people sure have it good."

She said in a sneering tone.

...Stop it, Ayako. You're digging your own grave here.

Naru shot Ayako a cold look. "So that's how it is. When I wasn't here, you were talking about this? No wonder you failed to improve the situation."

...You see. I told you.

"You player."

"Does it bother you that Hara-san and I go out?" Naru asked, a smug look in his face.

...Ah~ah~ Here it comes again. Ayako, just give up. You can't beat Naru.

"Don't speak so confidently because you're mistaken. I have no interest in children," Ayako retorted.

"Good, because I have no interest in old women."

Naru smirked.

Ayako turned around and dashed to the second floor.

That left me and Naru in the hallway.

"Naru, you don't need to hide it," I said, smiling. I tried to speak in my usual joking tone.

...Ah—this is no good. I'm really shooting myself in the foot.

But then, Naru has a confused look on his face.

Ehhh. So even Naru has these kind of moments. It surprised me.

"I don't know what Masako said," Naru said, avoiding my gaze, "but it's not that kind of relationship. —You're mistaken."

...A mistake.

It's the same thing that dream Naru said. A feeling of elation bubbled inside me.

...It's a mistake.

So that's how it is. I felt relieved. Even though it doesn't really mean anything. When Ayako asked, he just pushed her question away. But when I asked, he explained to me.

Ah. I'll leave it at that. Naru doesn't care if Ayako gets the wrong idea. But, he doesn't want me to get the wrong idea.

Ehh, that can't be. No, never mind. I'm satisfied for now. I need to behave myself, right?

I smiled to myself for a long time.

When we were organizing the equipment, Noriko-san and Ayami-chan came back from the hotel.

Naru explained what happened to Noriko-san.

"Is everything really okay?" Noriko-san asked uneasily.

"Don't worry. If a problem still persists, you can tear down the house. In that case, you won't have to worry."

After hearing Naru's reassurances, Noriko-san sighed and lifted Ayami-chan.

Ayami-chan looked at me and smiled.

The bright, clear smile of a child.

Ah, thank goodness...

"We can finally go home now," I said. Even though I don't know what Ayami-chan will think of all this.

Ayami-chan dashed towards me, a concerned look on her face.

...What's wrong?

Ayami-chan tugged my hand. "Mai-chan, are you leaving?"

"Hm? Yes."

"Can't you stay longer?" Ayami-chan pleaded, an unsatisfied look on her face.

...Don't worry. Ayami-chan's already this energetic so she'll forget this quickly and return to her normal lifestyle.

"Then, Mai-chan, when are you leaving?"

Being asked a question like that, I looked at Naru.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow then," I answered Ayami-chan.

"Are you staying here tonight?"

"Yes."

"Then, Mai-chan, can you sleep in my room tonight? If you want, you can keep living here."

Noriko-san couldn't help but smile. I did the same.

Ayami-chan looked at us.

In order to make sure everything is okay, we're staying an additional night. I followed Ayami-chan's wishes and slept in her room that night.

The knocking sounds were gone. The night couldn't have been more peaceful.

Epilogue

Tokyo, Shibuya Street.

I'm in "Shibuya Psychic Research" right now, organizing tapes. ‘The Case of Morishita*’ i.e.‘The Morishita Case’, I wrote that on the label (in Japanese) and pasted it on the tape. Then I made a memo of it for Lin-san.

What's this? ‘Corridor of Ground Floor*’...I don't know what it means. Oh, forget it. I'll just copy it down.

Arghh. Why do they like using English so much? I really hate this stupid notion of constantly using English. Do they think using English on everything is cool?

Hmph. I guess in the end, my English just sucks.

Ah, there's a guest. I quickly put on a smile and stood up.

...What, it's just you.

"Yo."

Bou-san carefreely waved hello.

This guy had been coming over rather often.

"It's so hot. Mai-chan, give me some tea."

"Why do I have to pour tea to someone who's not a guest? Or maybe, Bou-san, you have a request?"

Bou-san sighed in response. "Why is everyone being so cold lately?"

"This is our business policy."

"Business policy, what's that? Hey, I have a request: tea. Next time I'll take you out to a movie."

This guy is so demanding.

Oh well. Right when I was going to prepare the tea, "Mai, I want black tea."

Huh? Ayako.

"Bou-san, what are you doing around here?"

"I wanted to ask you the same thing."

Aren't you guys making this place into a coffee shop?

"Where's Naru?" Ayako asked.

"The director is in his office, thinking over things," I replied in a serious tone.

"Huh?"

"What is he doing?"

"I don't know," I replied. "That's what he told me. He's staring at a map, thinking over things. I think he's planning to travel."

"Oh—"

"Plus, if you bother him at a time like this, he'll get furious. So, forget about Naru, drink your tea, and go back home."

Ayako pouted. "Come on, I want Earl Gray."

...Okay, okay.

What noisy guests. Oh wait, they're not guests.

When I was about to go to the kitchen, the doorbell sounded.

...Did a guest...finally come?

"Ah, hello everybody."

"Ah— John," I murmured to myself.

"Yo," Bou-san greeted.

Man, forget it, if it's John.

But I decided to ask anyway, "John, is something up?"

"I was near the area, so I decided to drop by and say hi."

...Ah, I see.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

"...I'm sorry. Anything's fine. Don't mind me."

...Okay~okay~. Nice, I like his humility. Bou-san and Ayako, you guys can really learn from him.

I took out a pot and was about to boil the tea. And then, I had a weird feeling. Bou-san came, Ayako came, and John came. In other words, that means...

At that moment, the director's door opened, and Naru came out.

"Mai, tea..."

Naru said, and as he looked around the room, his eyes widened. "...Do you have some business here?"

"When you put it that way—"

"Kind of—"

Naru impatiently listened to their excuses.

"...Mai, what's going on here?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're your fan club? —What kind of tea do you want?"

"Any is fine," Naru replied, taking another glance at the crowd. "This isn't a coffee shop."

"Well, well," Bou-san said, clapping his hands. "Come on, don't be so mean— I heard you're going on a trip, right?"

"Who said that?"

"Weren't you studying a map? You're not just thinking about stuff, right?" I asked.

"That's what I had thought. But it seems it won't work out that way."

Naru sighed and sat by John.

The conversation quickly changed direction. Now they were talking about the latest books and thesis, psychic phenomena, and generally other things that only a specialist would know about.

I can't believe it.

Shaking my head, I began to pour tea.

Well, I'm fine with this. This way, I don't have to do any work. I just couldn't concentrate on my work when they're here.

After I arranged the teacups onto the plate, I was about to leave the coffee room. At that time, the doorbell rang again (I swear it's the fourth time now). ...It can't be.

My eyes were locked on the door.

The door opened, and in came a girl wearing a kimono.

...My head hurts.

"So it's just Masako. Is something up?" Ayako coldly greeted her.

"Well now, Matsuzaki-san, do you have any business here?"

"I just happened to be nearby, so..."

"Same here. Hello everybody."

Masako smiled at Naru.

Naru stood up in a flash. "...Mai, I'm going out for a while."

Huh?

"Ara, you're going out then?" Ayako asked.

"Yes... I have some business to take care of."

"I'll go with you."

"There's no need. You are free to do what you want."

...Naru, are you trying to run from Masako?

Come to think of it... In the case with Ayami-chan, when Ayako wanted to call Masako, Naru was absolutely against that idea.

"Well, if you're going out, then I'll go with you."

"No..."

Naru's gaze landed on Masako and Ayako. Masako slyly reached out for Naru's hand.

"I'll go with you," Masako offered.

Such an affectionate tone.

...This girl... Hmph. Is Naru the type to be ordered around by others? If he said no, then he'll say no until the very end.

...B-, but.

"....."

Naru mumbled something inaudible before walking out the door. He didn't shake Masako's hand off.

...*shock*

Masako turned back to us, a smile on her face. "Sorry to disturb you."

...We stared blankly at them for quite a while.

"...What's up with that person!"

I wondered who Ayako's statement was directed to.

...Man, didn't he say it was a misunderstanding? Naru, you liar!

Bou-san stood up. "Hey, Mai? Did Masako just use Naru's weak spot?"

"Weak spot? Would Naru have one?"

"...But, if that wasn't because of a weakness she knew, then what was that about?"

...If you ask me, who can I ask?

"Actually..."

Confused, John tilted his head.

"Mai, I've always wanted to ask this," Bou-san lowered his voice. "Is Naru really the director here?"

"...What are you talking about. Of course he is."

"So there aren't any other superiors then?"

"No."

...I don't think so.

"Why do you ask?" I questioned Bou-san.

"I thought you knew... How much do you think this office is worth?"

Ayako spoke as realization hit her. "When you put it that way, this is located on Shibuya Street, it's a new building, and it's very spacious..."

"Right? And all that equipment too. How much do those video cameras cost?" Bou-san continued.

...A lot. More money than you can imagine. I asked that question before.

John murmured absently, "Could it be a patron?"

...Hey! Hey!

"Did I say something strange?" John asked.

"A patron, you..."

John started to explain, "This is very common in Western society. Parapsychology isn't a recognized field yet, so it's quite common for a research institute to be supported by a patron, such as a financial group or a donation from a parapsychology professor."

"John... About that," Bou-san cautioned him.

"What?"

"Be careful with your Japanese. Patron means something different in Japan."

"...Huh?"

...Ah, he had me scared for a moment.

"That's strange," Bou-san said, pulling his hand back. "Maybe he really does have someone who supports him financially, and that person is Masako's father or something along those lines."

"Ah, so then, he wouldn't be able to reject Hara-san's offer," John concluded.

"Right."

Ayako stood up, "There's also another possibility... Naru could be their leader."

...Oh—

Everyone was deep in thought, when suddenly Bou-san shot up from his seat.

"Man, let's not think about this. In the end, Ayako was rejected."

"...Mind your own business!" Ayako shot back.

"How about we lighten up our mood? Want to go on a date with me?"

...Bou-san, you really do go overboard teasing people.

"I refuse. Who wants to go on a date with you."

"Okay, okay. Well, Mai, what about you?"

.....Me?!

"In return for pouring me tea, I'll take you out to the movies."

...In return for pouring tea? The tea was from the office, not from my own pocket. There's nothing to say...

Huh? Just like that, Bou-san asked me out.

"...Bou-san, are you treating me?"

"Of course. I just got my payment from the previous case, so now I'm rich."

"I'll go."

...I'll go. Just wait and see! Stupid Naru!

I'm a young, fifteen-year old blossoming girl. Who wants to wait for that idiot Naru anyway!

John and Ayako looked at us in surprise.

"I didn't realize you were into loli," Ayako remarked.

"Man, the younger they are, the better they are. Right, Mai-chan?"

"Right, Bou-san."

"Since you like little girls, why don't you go after that Masako? Then I can..."

...Hey, you.

"I make very good judgements," Bou-san responded frankly. "And compared to Masako, Mai is way better."

...Huh?

"Her personality is way better than Masako's."

...He sure knows how to flatter people. Bou-san, you have a really bright future in front of you.

"I— I think Bou-san's handsome too—"

"Oh~so you knew all along," Bou-san agreed.

"Yup (♥)"

Ayako stared at us. "Okay then! John, we're going on a date!"

"Eh??? M-...me?"

"Right. I'll treat you! Let's go!"

Ayako dragged John along.

...And that's how things went.

To any guests that come here later today, I'm terribly sorry I'm not in the office. Please try to talk with Lin-san instead. He's actually not that scary a person. I think.

Maybe you guys will even get into a deep conversation.

And so that's how things were... Have a nice day.

Author's Note

This is Ono. Thank you everybody.

I'm really grateful for those of you who purchased this book, flipped through it, or borrowed it from a friend.

Umm—This is the sequel to "Are There Really Evil Spirits?!".

Last time this novel was published, I received a ton of fan mail. I can't be thankful enough. Every mail I got asked me, "Is there a sequel?" I'm really glad. Luckily for everyone, I wrote the sequel about the emotionless ghost hunter with a lousy personality. This time Lin-san didn't get into any accidents.

Getting so much fan mail (even though saying this repeatedly can get tiring for you readers, I really am happy about it) really did surprise me. I'm really grateful, seeing stamps from nearly every city in this country. I got stamps from everywhere, except for Kyoto. I live in Kyoto, but I feel kind of lonely there. Please keep supporting me, to those of you who live there.

Ah, a lot of people asked, "Who's the most popular character?" The most popular character is Naru. The second most popular, to my surprise, is John. After that... It's probably Mai.

Oh yeah, in the epilogue, I wrote, "Kun wo nemura senai" (You Won't Be Neglected), to which a lot of people asked if I was a Ronin Warriors (an anime in 1988) fan. And yes, I am. In addition to the fan mail, I've also received fanart and posters, which makes me really happy.

And in case you wanna know, I like Shurato(♥)~

The fan mail also asked about my hobbies and my favorite actor and singer. My favorites are Zubari and "NG5". Even though I like other ones too, Zubari is very special to me so I won't talk about that for now. My favorite singers in "NG5" are Nishimura, Satoru, and Hiroshi-san (...What? You haven't heard of them? Huh?

You think they have bad voices as actors?)

...That's because... Things just end up like that.

This time's BGM, "You Won't Be Neglected" will continue.

And these songs as well: "Best Friends", "Through the Sky", "Sing", "Dizzy", "Close Your Eyes in the Mountains."

I really want to thank everybody. It's a shame I reply so slowly; I'm terribly sorry about that. I'm always worried whenever I do that. And I hope everyone doesn't wait too eagerly for my reply.

I want to say the name Ayami-chan again. Thanks for letting me borrow such a cute name. I hope you're not angry.

(Right, so this is what happened. I received lots of fan mail, and a lot of them said, "Please use my name." Thinking of a name to use is always difficult for me, so thank you. But when I'm in the middle of writing, I won't always use the name in a good way. For instance, the chances of me using your name on a ghost or corpse is actually really high. Is that alright with you?)

And Takada-san, I'm really sorry I asked you a stupid question. Thank you so much. Maybe next time when I have trouble with this, you can give me suggestions again. And also, Akiko Sakurai-chan, congratulations~! I hope you become a successful mangaka!

...And lastly, let me use this space for a moment. Taira Hamina-chan, how have you been? Is staying in Beijing rough? Where are you now? If you see this, can you contact me? I'll be really happy.

Sorry, that was rude of me.

There will be a sequel to this book too.

I'll work hard. I hope everyone keeps supporting me (♥).

Fuyumi Ono